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LAFFERTY  
SPACE CHANTEY**

# SPACE CHANTEY

R. A. Lafferty



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## CHAPTER ONE

*The Lay of Road-Storm from the ancient Chronicles  
We give you here, Good Spheres and Cool-Boy Conicals,*

*And perils pinnacled and parts impossible  
And every word of it the sworn-on Gospel.*

*Lend ear while things incredible we bring about  
And Spacemen dead and deathless yet we sing about:—*

*And some were weak and wan, and some were strong enough,  
And some got home, but damn it took them long enough!*

NEW SPACE CHANTEYS,  
Living Tapes, Sykestown, A.A. 301

WILL THERE BE a mythology in the future, they used to ask, after all has become science? Will high deeds be told in epic, or only in computer code?

And after the questing spirit had gone into overdrive during the early Space Decades, after the great Captains had appeared, there *did* grow up a mythos through which to view the deeds. This myth filter was necessary. The ship logs could not tell it rightly nor could any flatfooted prose. And the deeds were too bright to be viewed direct. They could only be sung by a bard gone blind from viewing suns that were suns.

Here trumpets blare. Here the high kerigma of heralds rises in silvery gibberish. Here it begins.

The war was finished. It had lasted ten equivalent years and taken ten million lives. Thus it was neither of long duration nor of serious attrition. It hadn't any great significance; it was not intended to have. It did not prove a point, since all points had long ago been proved. What it did, perhaps, was to emphasize an aspect, sharpen a concept, underline a trend.

On the whole it was a successful operation. Economically and ecologically it was of healthy effect, and who should grumble?

And, after wars, men go home. No, no, men start for home. It's not the same.

There were six of them there, Captains of hornets, those small craft that could go anywhere, six of them mustered out with their crews and with travel orders optional. And there wasn't an ordinary man among them. They were six full crews of the saltiest, most sulfurous men who could be combed out of the skies.

Roadstrum, one of the Captains, was as plain a man as ever lived, and now he spoke out plainly:

"I would say let us go directly home. We were boys when this began, and we are not boys now. We should go home, but I could be talked into something else.

"Dammit, I said I could be talked into something else!"

"A day or two on Lotophage might be worth it," said Captain Puckett. "We'll never be this close to it again and there must be something behind all those stories of the soft life there. They say it is Fiddler's Green and Theleme rolled together. They say that it may be Maybe

Jones City itself. If we don't like it we can leave at any time."

"The Captains Roadstrum and Puckett are from World, are you not?" Captain Dempster asked. "In that case it is not at all in your direction home."

"We are from World," said Roadstrum, "and we know the direction home."

"Lotophage is supposed to be a bums' world," said Dempster, "and if you stay there long enough you turn into a bum."

"If you're afraid of it we'll mark you off," said Captain Silkey, "and perhaps you have less a way to go to be a bum than we others. But I see that you are afraid."

Silkey knew how to put the needle into Dempster. The only thing that Dempster was afraid of was being called afraid.

"Look at it this way," said Captain Kitterman. "We can't get flight clearance to World or to anything in that Arm for three days, but we can go to Lotophage immediately. We can spend an equivalent day there, we can spend two, and still be home without loss of time. I suggest that we do it."

"For myself," said the sixth Captain, "it is imperative that I get home. There may have been changes there. My wife is faithful within limits, but I do not know whether ten years transcends those limits. My children should have reached an interesting age. Besides, nobody ever stops on Lotophage for only a day or two."

"What think you, Crewmen?" Roadstrum asked loudly of the splendid array. These men were the salt of the skies, the one out of ten who had determinedly stayed alive through the whole war, very often hurt, absolutely refusing to be killed. Never had there been so many great fine men assembled. They were the tall ones.

"I'd give the very ears off my head to go to Lotophage and enjoy it," said Crewman Birdsong, "but the ears on my head and other shapeless things about me will be the obstruction. They have a regulation on Lotophage, you know; only beautiful persons are allowed the enjoyments."

"They bend the regulation," said Captain Silkey. "They use the wide idea of beauty. All the fine surging things they count beautiful, even though they be a little rough in texture. They don't bar one man in a thousand."

"I'm the man in a thousand in that," said Birdsong, "but I'll go; I'll try it. There's no world I'd visit so gladly."

They put it to the vote of their crews. Most of the men were for the side trip to Lotophage, the pleasure planet. Only enough men for one hornet crew wanted to go home directly. The sixth Captain (he shall be nameless, he shall be nameless forever) assembled the cravens and they went to their ready barracks to wait for flight clearance home.

The other five crews tumbled into their hornets to go to Lotophage.

"I have shucked a skin like a yearly snake," said Captain Roadstrum. "I'm an onion and an outer layer is sluffed off me, that of Young Soldier the First Time. But I be bigger and ranker for losing the layer. All who go home in the wrong direction, we fly!"

*Where fiddlers scree'd and Rabelaisians loped, it was,  
And Maybe Jones had walked the streets and hoped it was.*

*So glad a land, you'd never find a grouser there.  
They said a man could really throw a rouser there!*

*Ah well, 'twas good enough for Lotophagians,  
But how about the horny hopping shaggy uns?*

*How turned the bright-eyed crew to sleepy gooney guys?  
How have a high old night with afternooney guys?*

Lotophage was beautiful at planet-fall, subdued gold, afternoon color. Roadstrum, who captained the lead hornet, intended to take the planet from morning side as he always did, but somehow he failed. He came down in an afternoon world. Then remembered that it was always afternoon on Lotophage.

You could have shipped home whole boat-loads of sugar from the sweetness of their welcome. These people really made you feel wanted. They were even kind with Crewmen Birdsong and Fairfeather when they took them into custody.

"It is that only beautiful people are allowed at large here," the Lotophagians told these unfortunates. "We bend a point, we break a point, but you two are beyond the point entirely. It's into the dungeons below the light that the two of you go."

"But look at Captain Roadstrum with that broken nose on him," Crewman Birdsong protested angrily.

"We bend a point there," said a Lotophagian. "What's a broken nose? He's a beautiful man withall."

"Look at Captain Puckett with a muzzle on him like a coon," howled Crewman Fairfeather with much heat.

"We break a point there," said the Lotophagian. "Take him from the rear, or in no more than one-eighth profile. Is he not beautiful? But we cannot in heart say the same thing about you. It's the dungeon for you two."

"For how long?"

"Until you die. Or until we need the room for two more uglier than yourselves, which is not likely. You two just fill it up."

"Sorry, boys," said Captain Roadstrum. "Sorry, boys," said Captain Puckett and Dempster and Silkey and Kitterman. And the Captains and the crewmen went about the business of enjoying Lotophage.

As with all low-gravity planets there was a lassitude about everything. The indolence was reflected even in the subtropical flora. And no other life but the lazy one would have been possible there, due to the thin atmosphere. It was because of this that one could get high there so quickly. The air was almost entirely oxygen with no nitrogen filler, but it was still very thin. But for those who love the lazy life, it was automatically induced.

Most flopped down where they were without even going to the nearest building. Why go further? Everything was available everywhere. They fell center-first into the slothful life. They slept hugely. It was hours later before any of them came to awareness again. Then they reclined Roman-fashion on the grass, and the sod rose and formed into contours to accommodate them.

"We used to lie on the roof at home when I was a boy and dream of this," said Cowper, one of Dempster's crewmen. "We'd dream how we would live on an island or planet, and the bananas would fall off the trees beside us. The coconuts would drop with a hole already in them for drinking; and after they were drained they would fall apart for eating. There would be a waterfall that turned a paddle-wheel that worked a music box, and you had only to whistle the key notes and it would take up any tune you wanted to hear. There would be cigarette vines dangling just above you, and you could snap one off and it would be already lit when you snapped it.

"It was big turtles, as I remember the daydream, who were taught to walk by with varieties of food on their backs. It was monkeys who were taught to prepare these foods."

"Ah well," said Captain Roadstrum, "when we travel we find how greatly our boyhood dreams are outstripped by reality."

Roadstrum had a four-foot-long pseudo-banyan fruit, actually a giant banana. He had been eating on it for many hours. He had a jug of rum-mix which he sucked with an attachment. The mix was under slight pressure so that he didn't have to suck very hard. At his side was a control panel of great selectivity. The invisible speaker, heard only by himself, would give him music or song, news or comment, drama and weird humor tales, gem-like repartee, or dirty stories.

He could squeeze a bulb in his hand and he would be flopped over into the warm water of the ocean pool where he could roll and float and dive. He could squeeze the bulb again and he would be transported back onto the grass by an ingenious lift. It was handy, and it was easy on the body.

In only one case did the panel fail him in information. That was when he asked it, "What day is this?"

"That answer we cannot give," the panel said. "It is ruled that, if you will not rise and see, it really does not matter to you. Besides, here there are not days. Here it is always afternoon."

The only clock available to Roadstrum without rising was the whisker clock. He felt by his beard that many days had gone by. He did not want too many days to have gone by. "Can you shave me?" he asked the panel. "Oh, sure," and the panel did it that quick. And this set the clock back to the beginning.

It was an easy life on Lotophage, and there was a whisper about the houris. The houris

were among the things supposed to make the time pass so quickly on Lotophage. In particular Roadstrum had heard the whisper of an houri named Margaret, and now he rose to find her.

He stopped only to inquire of the health of crewman Sorrel. Sorrel, one of Puckett's crewmen, had thus far been their only casualty. He had put his jaw out of place while yawning. He seemed all right now but he would take it easy for a while.

Generally an houri would come on signal, even a thought signal, and swoop a man up in her arms and carry him off to pleasure. Roadstrum, however, being unaccountably energetic, was already on his feet when Margaret came to his unvoiced signal. He suggested that they go to the *Sleepy Sailor* a full hundred feet across the lawn.

Margaret offered to carry him on her twinkling shoulders, but Roadstrum was a bundle of energy even on this soft world and he walked on his own two feet.

In the barroom of the *Sleepy Sailor* there were many patrons sleeping or lounging on couches. But there were others of more hardy breed who sat bolt upright ("What's that mean, anyhow?" asked Margaret; "It means downright upright," said Roadstrum), and even some who stood with toe on rail. Some of the patrons were familiar to Roadstrum. There was Maybe Jones himself.

"Is this the place, Maybe?" Roadstrum asked him.

"No it is not," said Maybe, "though it fools me for a while every time I come. I'll stay here a while till I get a tip on a likelier place. This is very like the Place Itself as it is in the early afternoon, when things are beginning to rustle and make starting noises. But it never blossoms out as does the place; it never really gets into it. 'Things will start hopping along about sundown,' I always say, but here there isn't any sundown."

"I have heard about a place," said Roadstrum, "if you have ten thousand Chancels d'or for the tip."

"Always, always," said Maybe Jones, who always paid well for tips that might lead him to the Place Itself. "Here it is. Now if you will mark down the rough coordinates here and whisper me a brief description of it I will be off to see." And Roadstrum gave it to him.

"I know a place that might be the place, Maybe," Margaret the houri said.

"Margaret, Margaret," said Maybe Jones, "you have given me ten thousand wrong leads, and yet I believe you could give me the right lead if you wished." And Maybe Jones was gone. He traveled forever looking for the lost pleasure place, and spacemen had begun to call it Maybe Jones City.

"Everybody loves it here," said Margaret the houri. "On Lotophage the law does not restrict. Elsewhere many things are illegal, as are we ourselves. We are forbidden to live anywhere else, and the penalty for disobeying that law is death. Where does that leave you if you happen to be immortal?"

"I have heard about you houris," said Roadstrum, "but the stories are confusing. It is said that you are older than people and that you will live forever."

"I sure hope so. I wouldn't want it any other way. But we change. I remember when I used to call myself Dolores and wore a rose in my hair and carried on like that. I remember when I was Debra and had a lot of style. I remember once when I was a Frenchie. Boy, it sure is fun being a Frenchie! But I don't remember very far back, only a couple of years. It seems like I always did have a lot of boyfriends."

"They say that you are timeless, which I do not understand," said Roadstrum.

"'He moves a mighty turban on the timeless houri's knees,' as the poet says. I don't understand it either, Roadstrum, but you use a timeless device on your own ships when you make the big instant jumps. Who needs ships?"

Roadstrum sat on the timeless houri's knees and found it pleasant.

"The report is that you are completely immoral," he said.

"Shouldn't wonder if I am," Margaret answered.

"That you are not born, do not generate, and never die."

"No, I don't remember ever doing any of those things."

"In Earth legend, it is said that you are older than Eve."

"You don't understand women, Roadstrum. Never tell one that she is older than Eve. No, no, she was twenty-one years old when she was born; and I'm not one to whisper such things, but it wasn't a normal birth. I'm eternally nineteen. Sure, I remember her. She was the first of those fat house-cats."

"You have always had a bad name among good people," said Roadstrum.

"It's those fat house-cats who give us a bad name. I don't care for them either."



"It is even said that you do not live at all, that you are only a tall story that wandering men tell."

"There are worse places to live than in tall stories," said Margaret. "But you are in them yourself, Roadstrum, in all the jokes and stories of the shaggy-people cycles."

"Margaret, it is all wonderfully pleasant on Lotophage, but does it not seem as if they forgot to put the salt in?"

"You can add as much salt as you wish, mighty Roadstrum, but the water will not boil as quickly."

"What, Margaret?"

"To boil a lobster, one takes first a lobster—"

A Lotophagian citizen came in.

"The men who have died, mighty Roadstrum, how do you want them disposed of?"

"Died? How many of our men died here?"

"Only a dozen or so. You'd be proud of them, such happy lazy smiles on their faces when they went!"

"Well, do they bury here, or burn?"

"Oh no, neither. We use. One does not bury nor burn the essence of ecstasy. They provide the distillation of all pleasure. Those bar-snacks that you eat so avidly, are they not fine?"

"They are fine," said Roadstrum. "I wondered what they are."

"From men off the packet ship *The Yellow Dwarf*," said the Lotophagian. "Those men really ate and drank and roistered while they were here, day and night, I mean deep into the afternoon. They stuffed themselves and they spread themselves. They built themselves up while they were tearing themselves down. When they finally gave out there was nothing left of them but bellies and nerves. It's the jangled nerves, the fevered psychic leavings imbedded in the sweet fat that gives the particular flavor."

"The taste is powerful and tantalizing," said Roadstrum, "but the origin leaves a nameless doubt in me."

"—to boil a lobster, one takes first a lobster—" said Margaret.

"Your own men should have an even more unique flavor," said the Lotophagian. "We will call the product 'Lazy Man Ecstasy Chips.' Give the word and we will have some of them for you quite shortly."

"All right," said Roadstrum, "go ahead. I don't know why I gave it a second thought but there are a crowd of second thoughts hovering over my shoulder this afternoon."

"—and one puts it in a bucket of cold water," said Margaret. "Then one very very slowly brings it to a boil—"

A little shabby man was singing *Show Me The Way To Go Home*, an ancient folk melody.

"What are you called?" Roadstrum asked him.

"John Profundus Vagabundus," said the little man. "Deep John the Vagabond'. I'm the original old-time hobo. I've been wandering these thousands of years and I can't get home. I just can't make it."

"Why can you not?" Roadstrum asked him. "You are from World, according to your speech, and we go to World. We will take you when we go."

"But you will not go," said Deep John. "And if you do, I cannot go with you unless you compel me to. I have passed the last possible moment here and I am not able to leave."

"Why should you want to, Vagabond? Is this not the end of the road that every vagabond has looked for? It is the world of every complete pleasure without pain. And they are so glad to have us here. See, they have already made a plaque 'Great Roadstrum loused around here,' and they have set it into my favorite spot at the bar. What other place so welcomes visitors? This is Fiddler's Green, this is Theleme, it is the land of the Lotus Eaters, it is Maybe Jones City—(no, belay that last; Maybe says he isn't sure that it is)—it is Utopia, it is Hy-Brasail, it is the Hesperides. It is the end of every road."

"It's the end of the road, all right," the hobo said, "but I didn't want it to end. That's Fiddler screeing on his instrument in the next room, but he says he doesn't believe that this is the Green at all. And Frankie-Boy is in there too. He eats and drinks, and he carries on as even a red-nosed priest should not; he talks philosophy and he tells those whoppers; but he says that he begins to doubt that this is Theleme, after all."

"I'll just have a couple of words with those fellows and convince them again how wonderful it is," said Roadstrum.

Crewmen Crabgrass and Oldfellow and Bramble came into the *Sleepy Sailor*. Bramble blew

a note on a pitch pipe and then he recited:

*All lusty liquor with a crystal cask for it,  
Whatever wished one only has to ask for it.*

*Tall pleasures piled in infinite variety,  
Raw rolling gluttony without satiety:*

*And under sheen than all things else is awesomer  
A golden worm that gnaws and gnaws and gnaws some more.*

"Whence the doggerel, good Bramble?" Roadstrum asked.

"It's a popular epic composing itself these days," said Bramble. "It's called the Lay of Road-Storm, and it's about yourself."

"I understand now," said Roadstrum; "certain low fellows have been making cracks about the 'Lay of Roadstrum' every time I set my hands seriously upon a woman here. But what is the 'golden worm' bit?"

"It's the way we feel," the crewmen shouted. "The golden worm is gnawing at our entrails. There is too much of it here, and it doesn't move along at a seemly pace. Captain Roadstrum, we are tired of lying around and going on little benders and jazzing these little girls here. We want to go on big benders. We want to find the big girls."

"What's to stop you, good men?" Roadstrum asked them. "It seems that everything is available here. It surely is here in the *Sleepy Sailor*. Can you think of any pleasure not to be found here?"

"No, we can't, Captain," said Crewman Crabgrass, "and it bugs us. How do we know this is everything, just because we can't think of anything else? We can't even get into places like *Shanghai Sue's of the After Dark Club of the Haystack* or the *Rowdy-Dow*. They all have signs on them, 'Open at twenty-one o'clock.'"

"There is surely plenty to do till then," said Roadstrum.

"Till then? Captain Roadstrum, there isn't any twenty-one o'clock here. It's always afternoon."

"Oh, those are only false fronts and signs that some of the boys from the tramp ship *Muley Cow* put up for fun," said Deep John the hobo. "They sure were good fellows from the *Cow*. I can taste them yet."

"False fronts or not," said Crewman Oldfellow, "they've sowed the seeds of doubt in us. If we sink back into it again now we'll be like the man who was drowning and didn't care."

"Good thing he didn't," said Roadstrum, "or he'd have worried himself to death."

"—passed the last possible moment," said Deep John the Vagabond.

"—heat the water very very slowly," said Margaret, "and the lobster will not stir till he is irrevocably boiled."

"Get your hot 'Lazy Man Ecstasy Chips,' called the Lotophagian coming in with a great basket of them. They all began to eat great gobs of them, and they were the finest ecstasy chips anyone ever ate.

"These in particular," said Crewman Oldfellow. "I never in my life ate anything with so fine a flavor. I wish that Crewman Bigbender were here to taste them. Somehow they remind me of him."

"Let me see the tag on that bunch," said the Lotophagian. "Ah yes, they *are* Crewmen Bigbender."

They ate variously. It was all good. They drank. It was very good. They dozed. It was perfect.

"I don't care if I never wake up," Roadstrum murmured as he drifted under.

"—passed the last possible moment—" breathed Deep John the hobo.

"They are like all the others," said Margaret the houri. "Why did I think they might be different? I wanted to go back to World with them. I used to have a lot of fun on World. I'll wait me the centuries yet, and I'll yet find a man able to leave here after he comes. But he'll have to be a man in a million."

"I am a man in a million," said Roadstrum out of his shallow sleep.

"It is too late," said Deep John. "On the tomorrow we will eat 'Mighty Roadstrum Ecstasy Chips' and I'm sure they will have a mighty flavor. But I want to go home."

"I have the feeling that my life is in great danger," Roadstrum croaked nervously in his thin sleep.

"Never in your life will you be in such danger as you are at this moment," said Deep John. "You go under now and you can never come up again. And you have gone under."

"I never trusted a one-sided coin," Roadstrum mumbled in his sleep. "I never trusted a too-easy pleasure."

Roadstrum reared up suddenly like a great bear coming out of hibernation on Saint Casimir's Day.

"I have to go home at once," he said ponderously.

"They all say that but none of them do," Margaret told him.

"I am in great danger," said Roadstrum.

"Of course you are," said Deep John. "If you live through this, you will be in other dangers where your life is worth nothing; you will be in jams that will scare the very hair off your head. But you will never be in such danger as you are now here on Lotophage."

Bellowing like a bull, Roadstrum, the one man in a million, ran out of the *Sleepy Sailor* and began to kick the men awake. Most of them fought to get back to sleep or to death. Some of them really wished to leave Lotophage, and they said so with great sorrow but with no hope. And some of them turned over on their faces and hung on, swearing that nothing could ever tear them away from this soft world. There were handles in the grass provided for hanging on. Lotophage was a jealous world and did not give up her victims willingly. Some of these men had befouled themselves, being unwilling to stir for anything at all, even to give their panels instructions to care for them.

Roadstrum rushed to the dungeon. "I'll get those two if I have to smash the place," he swore. "They, at least, will not be in love with it here. They will help me with the others."

He went to the dungeon and (thing beyond believing) Crewmen Birdsong and Fairfeather had just been released. Two men even uglier than they had arrived on Lotophage, and the hornet men were released to make room for them.

Two men uglier than Birdsong and Fairfeather? Are you sure? That is what the authorities on Lotophage decided. Two men from the *Smiling Skink* were put in the dungeon in place of Birdsong and Fairfeather, and they are still there.

In a frenzy now, Roadstrum fired up two of the hornet ships. He got Captain Puckett onto his feet and aware of the great danger of remaining. He promised to take Margaret back to World, where she had not been for several thousand years. He called to Deep John the Vagabond to come along if he was coming.

Roadstrum and Puckett and Birdsong and Fairfeather, Margaret and Deep John, jerked up those men who clung to the grass less tightly. They carried them, sniffing and sobbing, to the hornet crafts.

They enskied, they were in free space, and the most terrible of all dangers was behind them.

On Lotophage, as they left it, it was still afternoon of the same day and not perceptibly later than when they had arrived.

## CHAPTER TWO

*One needs for picture of the Laestrygonians  
All hump-backed cuss-words and vile polyphonians.*

*"We'll cry a warning here though we be hung for it!"  
The fact is, not a crewman had the tongue for it.*

*Those boys are rough, nor steel nor steinn can stay with them;  
You'd better have visceral blood to play with them.*

*That human meat and mind should ever rout the things!  
It scares us silly just to think about the things.*

*We trim to decent measure these giganticals  
And couch the tale in shaggy-people canticles.*

Ibid

BOTH HORNETS were never inoperative. Somehow they had never shaken off the lassitude they had acquired on Lotophage, and they had been sluggish for the whole trip since. Puckett's hornet had to come down for an overhaul, and that of Roadstrum was nearly as bad.

"A planet, a planet," Puckett hollered over the communicator. "Find us a planet quickly, Roadstrum."

"The only one we can possibly make is Lamos," Roadstrum called to him.

"Lamos of the Laestrygons? But that's a primitive world. There will be no facilities for overhaul there. Pick another."

"I can't, Puckett. My craft won't hold, and you say yours is worse. Make ready for it. Do you still have your psych library and your tapes?"

"Oh hell no. We pitched them out long ago. Is there a people on this world? Is there a language?"

"Puckett, there's information here that I don't trust. A lot of these things were filled in by jokers for the fun of it, figuring nobody would ever get to such a world anyhow. The inhabitants are giant-like and primitive, it says, believed to be a species of Groll's Trolls."

"We've tangled with those big fellows before. They don't worry me."

"These are much bigger than ordinary, it says. They worry me a little. But their language, and this is the joker part of it, is given as something between Old Norse and Icelandic of Earth. How would primitive Troll people have Earth languages? And how such odd ones?"

"Try it, Roadstrum, try it, since you have psych tapes. We've at least fifteen minutes before our hard or easy crash. That's time enough for your men to learn any subject by psych. We shouldn't have pitched ours out, but we have a Norwegian on craft, Oldfellow. Did you know he was a square-head? We'll plug him into the brain-buster and then all plug in on him. Maybe modern Norwegian will bring us close enough. It's something to pass the last fifteen minutes and keep the men from getting nervous. It's all a joke anyhow. And we already know six basic dialects of the Groll's Trolls language. We'll probably encounter some variations of them here."

They came down on Lamos with their retrogrades shrieking. It was a heavy-gravity planet and their power was almost completely shot.

"We'd never make it if it wasn't all downhill," Roadstrum complained. "All right, men, into your pumpkin-picking cradles! We're going to hit hard!"

Ah, it was a hard crash for both the hornets. It knocked everybody out, cracked ribs and clavicles, ruptured lungs and diaphragms, and filled everybody with blood in mouth, nose, and ear. It was suffocating pain riding up through their unconsciousness, quite a long unconsciousness.

"I could open one eye if I could raise a hand to it to uncake the blood," Roadstrum groaned much later. "I could raise one hand if I could find the other hand to raise it with. I could stand on my feet if I weren't broken in the middle and hinder parts and if I hadn't suddenly doubled in weight. But all these things I will do yet. I am the mighty Roadstrum and I will perform the heroic feat of sitting up and prying my eyes open, and even of raising my voice in exhortation."

He did so. He rose, not only to a sitting position, but onto his feet indeed. And he howled to his men to arise and encounter and defend. He got Crewmen Fairfeather and Birdsong up. He got the great Captain Puckett up and moving. He got the valiant Di Prima and Boniface, and Bramble and Crabgrass and Eseldon up and going, and the others had begun to stir. They had been hurt before often, and they knew how to rise above it.

They were out of their crafts. They were on a rock-strewn scarp with a little short sedge growing out of it. They were under a green-gray sky on a very heavy world, and they were surrounded by grinning giants or ogres, the largest sort of Groll's Trolls ever seen.

Listen, none of the men would head up to the navels of any of these creatures, and the men from the hornets were all fine tall men. These giants were splayfooted and thick as tree-trunks. They had shoulders two meters wide, humps on the back of their forward necks like bull humps, and heads that were howlingly huge. The ears on them were like nine-liter jugs, and their mouths were wider than their wide faces in defiance of all rules.

Margaret the houri was bubbling around, unabashed and unhurt, and was talking at a great rate to the grinning giants. And the language they were using was something between Old Norse and Icelandic of Earth. There wouldn't be much difficulty there then, but it was surely a peculiar business.

"I am Bjorn," said the leader of the Trolls in a voice that sounded as though he had great boulders grinding around in his gizzard. "The others of us have names which you may learn if you live long enough into this day. Come to breakfast now. Boys, you really better eat a big breakfast! You're going to need it."

"No, no," Roadstrum protested. "We must see to our crafts first. We must assess the damage and the possibility of repair. And then we have our own rations to serve us until we have made a study of the produce here."

"Little boy-men, you'd better forget about your crafts or boats or globes," Bjorn told them. "My little boy will fix your boats for you. He's mechanically inclined. And you had better forget your rations. If they produce such puny types as you they will not serve you for this day. We look at you. We look at us. We laugh. Come eat what we eat. You will have to eat the big breakfast of our sort because you are going to fight the big fight afterwards and we want you to be up for it."

"Wait, Bjorn," Roadstrum howled. "Don't let that big fellow into the hornet craft with those seven big stone hammers. He'll smash things. He'll ruin us forever. I'll just stop him—"

But Roadstrum's feet were spinning in the air and Bjorn was holding him high and clear by the scruff of his neck.

"There is no big fellow going into your craft, good Roadstrum," Bjorn assured him. "That is my little boy Hondstarfer. I told you that he is mechanically inclined. He will fix whatever is wrong with your boats. In the meanwhile you will eat the big breakfast of your lives and then you will fight the big fight to your deaths."

"But he'll break up all the instrumentation with those big stone hammers," Roadstrum protested again, still flailing his feet in the air.

"Have you not trust in me?" the boy Hondstarfer called as he entered the first of the hornets. "Have you not noticed? One of my stone hammers has buckskin laced over it. I use that for the fine work. Do not worry, I will fix your boats, or else I will fail to fix them. This is the high logic. I am the best and only mechanic on Valhal, which is called Lamos by the ignorant."

A boy? He must have been a meter taller than big Roadstrum.

"Somebody stop that young fool!" Roadstrum called, still beating the air in the grasp of

Bjorn. "If he meddles with the craft we're stuck here forever. Kill him or something, but stop him anyhow!"

"He who kills before breakfast will have bad luck all the forenoon," Bjorn gave them the proverb. "I would take it unfavorably if anyone killed him. He is my little boy and you will let him do what he wants. I am sure he will fix your boats. Nobody can chip stone or dress leather so finely as my boy; nobody can fit a balk or a beam so well. He is the best mechanic anywhere. And call him not a fool! You think we have no feelings just because we are slobs? Here comes the cars. Now we will go to eat the big breakfast. Try to play the men at the bord whether or not you will be able to play it in the field."

Here come the cars, Bjorn had said. Cars? What *were* those things sliding in through the low sky, skimming in not ten meters above the land, silently and flatly and raggedly? Wait a minute now. It is camouflage of some sort. They cannot be big flat slabs of stone sliding about in the air with giant Trolls standing on them! But they sure did look like big slabs of stone, some of them twenty meters in diameter, some of them only a tenth as wide. There were ten-man and five-man and one-man slabs sliding along flatly above the ground. And when they came down they still looked like stone slabs, and they were.

Well, how do stone slabs as heavy as these (and the smallest of them were so heavy that twelve men could not budge them at all on the ground) cruise about above the land with no mechanism whatsoever.

"Crewman Bramble, how is that possible?" Captain Roadstrum asked.

"It isn't. Our wits are scrambled, our eyes fail us; it is not possible at all."

"I see that you have never encountered a science as advanced as ours," the boy Hondstarfer said as he came out of one of the hornets to enlighten them. "This is so far beyond you that I am not sure I can explain it to you. You yourselves are caught in the electromagnetic dead-end, so you are hardly able to imagine a thing like this and you doubt your eyes. We are fortunate. We have no surface metal on our world, or perhaps we would have been caught in the same dead-end. Is this not much neater? Our cars operate naturally on the static-repulsion principle."

"How can that be?" asked Crewman Bramble, who knew the theory of everything. "The static-repulsion principle can move nothing heavier than feathers."

"What do you use for feathers on World?" the boy Hondstarfer asked in amazement. "Here it will move stone slabs of a pretty good size, and it would move mountains if they weren't rooted so deeply into the land. This is a dry world and one without metals in its surface. It is mostly of pure flint. So we take slabs of chert or impure flint from the mountains, and there is sufficient static-repulsion between the slabs and the surface flint to enable the slabs to glide and fly."

"It is impossible," said Crewman Bramble.

"Shall I tell you the supreme scientific law of the universes?" Hondstarfer asked. "Hold onto your ears or they may fall off at the magnitude of the disclosure. It is all scientific laws crushed into one. Like charges repel. Think about it."

"Where do the slabs get their charges, Hondstarfer?"

"I don't know."

"Why don't all the slabs fly about all the time?"

"I don't know."

"Why do they fly so lightly in the air and then sink so heavily to the ground?"

"I don't know."

"Will it work for anything besides flint and chert?"

"I don't know. There isn't anything else on our world."

"Well, how do you steer the things?"

"It's all in the way you rub your feet on them. But you will have to put felt boots over those metaled things you're wearing. Here, the women come with small children's boots for you to slip on. Anything else would burden you so that you couldn't move."

Women? Dame elephants rather. They were very large, though not so large as their men-folks, and broad and almost shapeless. They were smiling and mysterious and ineffably wild, unbeautiful, ogresses, giantesses. But Crewmen Fairfeather and Birdsong and others went for them. Being somewhat grosser in their choices than the other crewmen, they were completely taken by these great creatures.

"I have never been so humiliated in my life" said Margaret the houri. "The giants all say, 'Go away, little girl, go away to your mother. Eat the big breakfast and someday you will

grow up to be a real woman.' Real woman! Fellows, if there was ever tenth-rate competition, this is it. And I can't compete."

"You go now with my father and the others," the boy Hondstarfer said, "to eat the big breakfast and then to die the big death. And I go to get a bigger stone hammer and still a bigger one. It is fun to work on your flying boats. There are so many things in them that I will have to change or throw out completely. It is no wonder that they break down, they are so primitive."

"Come, come, little boy-men," big Bjorn called. "Mount on the two stone slabs set aside for you there and come to the breakfast hall. Follow us. Oh, you must all put on the little felt boots over your metaled ones. Were you not told? We go now. You follow."

"How do you get these blimy things off the ground?" stone-slab Captains Roadstrum and Puckett called out to the giants after they had assembled their men on the slabs.

"Rub your feet, little boy-men, rub your feet!" laughed Bjorn and Hross and Hjortun and Fjall and Kubbur and all those shaggy giants. "Were there ever such dolts? How do you get your own flying boats off the ground? Rub your feet, little things, rub your feet."

The Captains and crewmen rubbed their feet on the big chert slabs, drew hot sparks; and then the slabs jolted and rose from the ground and glided crazily along. They learned the tricks of steering and gaining height quickly. These were really easy vehicles to operate.

And now they had the impression of great height when they were no more than five hundred meters in the air, an impression that they never had in the hornets. It was all sheer down-drop in the windy air, and these things had no side rails of any sort on them, and they tipped and swerved.

"The magic carpet!" said Crewman Bramble. "We have evidence now that the medieval Arabs of Earth really used such. They worked only over the very dry rock deserts, flint and chert deserts; and they were not carpets only, but thin slabs of stone covered with carpeting. Antiquarians have assured us that the evidence is overwhelming that such things were really used. I didn't believe it. I don't know how they could have worked. I don't know how these can work."

They came to the face of a sheer mountain. They hovered in the air in front of a black hole in the face of that rock.

"Come in to the breakfast," Bjorn called. The ogres drifted into the black interior on their stone slabs, and the men followed them in. And came down hard. The static-repulsion principle seemed to fail when they were in the heart of the stone here.

"Clumsy!" taunted Bjorn. "Clumsy!" taunted Blath and Hrekkur and the other ogres.

"You are the new guests here," said Bjorn in the cave darkness. "Tell the sun to come in, little Roadstrum."

"I'd as well tell the wind to lie down and the waves to be quiet," said Roadstrum. "I don't know what you mean."

"You are a boy-brained blockhead," said Bjorn. "What words do you use to order the sun when you are on World? Here it is simple to recite the words. You say, 'The sun, come you in,' and the sun comes in.

"The sun, come you in," Roadstrum said valiantly, wondering at himself. And the sun came in.

It was not, of course, the big sun of Lamos, but the little sun, the little boy of the big sun. It came in through the doorway of the cave, a hot yellow ball three meters in diameter, and it rose up to the roof of the cave and shone there. It was bright and hot, and the cave had been very cold. Water began to run down the walls, and globs of ice to fall.

"What is it?" asked Roadstrum of Crewman Bramble.

"It is the little sun, the little boy of the big sun," Bjorn interrupted. "Does not the sun of World have little boys also?"

"What is it really?" Roadstrum asked Bramble.

"Some type of ball lightning," said the crewman. "But no, I see that it is a glowing stone. It must be a very small asteroid captured in the queer ambient of this nonmetallic world. It will glide around as the other rocks, and it should burn up if it is the proper texture. I don't know by what means it obeys voice commands. It burns but it does not burn up. I haven't worked out a theory on it yet. I suppose that Bjorn's hypothesis is the best one; it is the little boy of the big sun."

"We have roast bull first," said Bjorn, as a big bull was driven to them from some inner space of the cave. "Roadstrum, you are the high guest; skin the bull."

"I would need first a long steel knife to kill it," great Roadstrum said. "And then skinning knives and tongs and an A-frame and a block and tackle to handle it. Give us the equipment, Bjorn, and myself and five or six of my men will have it killed and skinned within the hour."

"You are really the great Road-storm?" Bjorn asked in wonder. "Little boy-men, you don't know how to skin a bull. Fjall, skin the bull."

Fjall broke the horns off the bull and threw them away. Then he put his fingers in the horn holes and broke a girdle out of the skull. He peeled all the skin off the skull. He broke the front hooves off the animal and peeled the skin up the legs; then he did the same thing with the back quarters. With his great thumbnail he then slit the skin up the belly. He rolled the hide back over the hump and shoulders. Then, going around behind the unhappy animal, he caught the bull by the tail and jerked the entire skin off in one piece, leaving the bull bawling and bare.

"See how easy it is when you know how," Bjorn said. "Now, Roadstrum, spear the bull on that pike and raise it up to the sun in the roof and roast it. At least you can do that."

"I cannot raise the bull on that pike," said Roadstrum. "I cannot even raise that pike."

"Oh helvede! Spear the bull and raise it up, Hrekkur," Bjorn said, and Hrekkur did it. That little boy of the sun roasted it thoroughly and quickly with a great dripping of burning wonderful grease and a powerful aroma. They ran other bulls through then, skinned them like gloves, and roasted them whole on spits held high in the small sun.

"Let us not get ahead of the count," said Bjorn. "I doubt me a little whether the boy-men can eat a bull each. We will see. Why do you hesitate, Roadstrum? That first bull is yours. Take it, take it in both hands if need be, and eat it up valiantly."

But Bjorn was right. The boy-men from the hornet crafts could not eat a whole bull each. It took three, and sometimes four of them, to devour a whole bull. And they ate pretty heavily too.

Hey, they brought oat-cakes bigger in diameter than a man is high. They brought onions as big as the head of Burpy, and he had the biggest head of all the crewmen. They brought in honey-mead in casks large enough to make houses out of. And the breakfast beer! They knocked a bung out of the cave wall itself and the beer flowed, black and strong as Irish porter, in a great stream. It was a mountainful of beer they had there.

You think that was all? They had pork pies with a full-grown boar in each of them.

"Roadstrum, Roadstrum," Bjorn chided. "Do not throw away the tusks. One eats them too. They will make a man of you. It is the same with the teeth and the hooves of the stallions that we come to in the next course."

"And the antlers of the stag too, big Bjorn?" Roadstrum asked, for he would not let the huge fellow out-talk him in any case.

"Oh certainly, little Roadstrum. The accepted way is to swallow them without crumpling them or abridging them, but I see that you have neither the mouth nor the gullet for that."

Well, the boy-men from the hornet crafts acquitted themselves pretty well after they had gotten into it. They were slow starters is all. The mightier of them ordered another round of bulls and ate them with only two men to a bull. They ate those little baked whole foxes as though they were peanuts, and the baked rams as though they were cashews. They devoured the beavers, as was the custom, pelts and all. They developed a taste for whole roast wolf and nearly ran the Laestrygonians out of that commodity. And they found eagle stuffed with meadow mice to be a really different tidbit.

They found also that there is this about honey-mead: the second gallon that one drinks is better than the first, and the third is better and more intoxicating than the second. They got as high as orn-eagles, and as stuffed as pigs on acorns.

"Tell me in truth, little Roadstrum, was it not a great breakfast?" Bjorn asked.

"It was a great breakfast, Bjorn," Roadstrum said in all honesty. "In all my life I have never eaten a more filling one."

"And now, Roadstrum and all your small things, we fight," Bjorn announced. "We fight the great fight to the great death. You'll like this part of it, for I begin to see that you are really good fellows and men after all."

"With what do we fight, and for how long?" Captain Puckett asked.

"We fight with the stone-tipped spears and pikes and with stone battle-axes," Bjorn said. "We have little boy-sized ones that you will be able to lift if you wish to use them. Or, if you have weapons of your own, you may use those; and we fight till everybody is dead. How else is a fight?"



"Can we use our hand blasters?" Captain Roadstrum asked.

"We do not know what are hand blasters," said Bjorn, "but if they are weapons, you may use them, of course. Now, Roadstrum, dismiss the sun and we will go out. Say only, 'The sun, go you out.'"

"The sun, go you out," said Roadstrum, and the little sun unhooked itself from the ceiling of the cave and glanced brilliantly out of the gaping door.

They all mounted their stone slabs, rubbed their feet, and zoomed out of the cave entrance into the sunlight, that of the father sun, not of the little-boy sun who had been in the cave. They landed in a great meadow. Captain Puckett sent Crewman Birdsong back to the hornet crafts to get a hand blaster for each man.

"Do you want one, Deep John?" Captain Roadstrum asked the vagabond.

"No, I always use a piece of coal-car coal swung in a bandanna," said the hobo.

"We do not know what is coal-car coal or bandanna," said Bjorn, "but use them if they are weapons."

"A good solid rock will do for the piece of coal," said Deep John, "and a little sling I have here to swing it in. And I believe a little stone slab I have my eye on could be used both for vehicle and weapon."

"You are sure you want to use those little things, boys?" Bjorn asked when the hand blasters were brought to the crewmen and passed around. "They are so short and light, how will you kill one of us with one of them? Better take the stone-tipped spears and then we will have real sport. You boy-men are small but you seem to be fast. With the stone spears you will kill some of us, at least, and we will have sport."

"No, we will use our blasters," Roadstrum said. "And I will tell you, Bjorn, that it will be strictly no fight. I do not understand your custom in this, but we do not intend to fight till all of us are dead. We desire very much that none of us be dead. And we will fight till all of you are dead only if it is absolutely necessary."

"Spoilsports!" called Hross and Kubbur, the big giants. "Dog-warriors," Fjall jibed. "Little-girl men," Hrekkur derided, "you are not men for a fight. You are not men at all."

"We are men," said Roadstrum, "and we are masters of men. Bjorn, bring a pig or a sheep and I will show you how easily and at what a distance one of these blasters can kill."

"Do you not insult us!" Bjorn cried angrily. "Pig-soldiers! Sheep-soldiers! Let us see you kill one of our men with one of your blasters. Then we will know whether they are weapons for men."

"No, no, I could not kill a living man or—ah—ogre for demonstration," Roadstrum said.

"I could," said Crewman Fairfeather. Fairfeather had always been something of a blow-top, but there was something different about him now. He had a grin on him that was almost like the grins of the Laestrygonians. He seemed to grow larger. He looked like—well, he had always been the ugliest of the crewmen, now he was nearly as ugly as the Laestrygonians themselves—he looked like one of the giants, that same happy insane look in the eyes.

Fairfeather shot big Hrekkur with his blaster. He tore a big hole in the giant and killed him.

"Now you've torn it!" said Roadstrum angrily. "We'll probably have to kill them all. Watch for their moves."

But all the giant Laestrygonians were whooping with laughter.

"Killed him! Killed him!" they whooped and roared. "Man, he did look funny when you killed him so easily."

"Look at his face, the side of it that's left. He still doesn't believe it."

"Hey, the boy-men got a real weapon going."

"Show us again."

"Kill me."

"Kill me. Hey, little fellows, kill me with one."

"Easy fellows," big Bjorn said. "We can't use all our fun up in one moment. You'll all get killed this day. We don't want to have our sport over too early; and remember, we have to kill the boy-men also. Are we ready? Onto your stone slabs all and into the air for battle!"

"Must we fight on those things in the air?" Roadstrum asked.

"There are no rules. We do whatever seems the most fun," Bjorn said. "Fight where you will. We like to come zooming at each other on the stone slabs and transfix each other with our spears as we crash together. Fight on the ground if you wish, but we will zoom down and spear you on the ground."

"We will try it both ways," said Roadstrum.

Both men and ogres got on their stone slabs and, rubbing their feet on them, lurched up into the air. They fought with two or three men or ogres on a slab, or with only one on a slab. The men could not steer or maneuver as well as the ogres could, but they learned rapidly since their lives depended on it. And it is very hard to kill with a blaster when riding one of those stone broncos in the sky and shooting at a fluttering evasive target.

Crewmen Fairfeather and Birdsong and Crabgrass were speared with stone-headed spears and killed, but each of them took an ogre with him. These crewmen died with curious whoops of laughter, quite unmanlike, quite ogrelike.

Crewmen Di Prima and Kolonymous were knocked off their slabs and killed in their fall to the ground. Crewman Oldfellow was cloven from crown to crotch with a stone battle-ax, and he died in the both parts of him. And every blaster shot by every man had missed. Only Fairfeather and Birdsong and Crabgrass had killed ogres, and only these had taken stone spears after the unsuccess of their blasters.

"To ground, to ground," Roadstrum ordered. And all the hornet craft men grounded their slabs. "The low air is the element of the ogres and we can't get them there," Roadstrum explained. "We'll stay on the ground where we can take steady aim, for we cannot do it on those wobbly slabs in flight. And they'll have to come down to our level to try to spear us. Here, here, let's form in rings of about five men each, and one can blast them front-on from whichever direction they come."

They formed so. The Laestrygonian ogres swooped around on their slabs in the low air and devised tactics. And then a large stone slab hung in the air directly over every five-man group.

"Blast up," Roadstrum ordered.

All blasted up, and they tore some holes in the stone slabs. But they could not tell whether they killed any ogres. And not one blast in five went all the way through its slab. Those were good stones.

"We wait them out," said Roadstrum. "They cannot spear us unless they expose themselves, and we have them outranged. We wait while the poor giants make up their slow minds. I wonder what signal they use for surrender?"

"Whup! Whup! Whruuupp!!!" It was like an earth-blast shaking the very ground under all of them. One of the stone slabs had dropped suddenly in dead-fall and had smashed and killed all five men stationed under it. Blood running in little rivulets from under the edges of the stone slab, and wild hooting laughter from the low skies!

"Scatter," roared Captain Roadstrum. "Scatter," roared Captain Puckett. And the men all scattered pretty nimbly.

"Crewman Bramble, go up on a small slab and scout," Roadstrum ordered. "Find us an open-face cave or a haven of some kind under an overhang where they must come in to us and cannot drop on us."

Crewman Bramble scraped his feet on a small stone slab and was airborne, followed by whooping giants with stone-tipped spears.

"Up and fly at random," Roadstrum ordered them all. "Stall and evade and blast. We will learn the low-air tricks. We have them outranged, and there is no excuse for letting them kill us so easily."

So they were all up in the air.

But the only one who was doing any good was Deep John the Vagabond, called by Captain Roadstrum their native light-horse auxiliary. The old hobo had a very thin, very small stone slab, with a sharp cutting edge which he made to be the forward edge. He was able to attain very rapid flight on this and come in behind the flying giants. At first he used his handy rock in its swinging sling, crashing it into what should have been the brain-base of the giants, but he could attain nothing against their bull-humps. Then he used his slab itself for a weapon, swooping in beyond them at a very high speed and calculated height, and just plain slicing their heads off with the forward cutting edge of his slab. Their heads hit the ground with thunderous thumps, and the crewmen could keep track of the kills of their ally.

But say, those giants did have a happy time of it, no matter that a few of them were beheaded. They swooped in on the men on their flying stones, fluttering and banking and using their slabs like shields, and then suddenly struck with their long spears and spitted the men. There was laughter that made the low skies ring like bells whenever they did this. There was even louder laughter on the part of the giants when one of their own folk was killed and

blown apart by a blaster. It seemed to be the funniest thing they had ever seen.

And in truth it was funny to see one of them blown apart and come down in huge bleeding hunks, the great head usually broken free and landing with a brain-spewing crash. There was never a folk who took such delight in bloody slaughter as did the Laestrygonians.

After a long while, Crewman Bramble came sailing back to the men, a spear quite through his shoulder giving him a rakish and almost heroic appearance.

"Follow, follow," Bramble called. "It isn't much, but I have found something."

They followed him to a huge stone platform under an overhanging ledge, and all the remaining men landed on this. It was at the end of a pocket, the smaller bit of a wedge, and it could be defended. It had a natural parapet, breast-high, and all were behind it with their blasters. There weren't many of them left though, six or seven, and more than twenty had been killed by the giants. How many giants were left they did not know. The men had never counted them, and they did not know them all. The giants all looked very much alike to the men. Here the giants could come at them only one at a time, and they would be fair shot for every blaster.

One of them swooped in on his slab and was blasted to bits very close. His slab staggered away and crashed into the cliff-side very near the haven. The men were covered with a rubble of broken stone and were drenched with the giant's blood.

Another came in, and another. One came in all the way, leaped from his slab, and killed both Crewmen Burpy and Fracas with a single spear-thrust, and was then blasted to death by Captain Puckett. But the shattered bulk of the giant near crowded them out of their haven and left them knee-deep in blood behind their parapet.

Still could be heard the idiot ear-rupturing laughter and hooting of Vetur and Fjall and many nameless giants in the low sky. Still could be heard the happy strong voice of Bjorn.

"Little boy-men, did you ever have so much fun a fight as this? Hey, it's a rousing thing, is it not? We always like to show our guests a good time."

Quite a few hours had gone by in all this. It wasn't swift. It had been all the tedious maneuvering of battle that is not done in an instant. But the men were all soldiers and they began to enjoy it. And still they were incomparably weary.

"One hour the break," came the big voice of Bjorn from the swooping low sky. "It is the noon. Come out and loosen up, and the women bring the water."

"Is it a trick?" asked Captain Puckett.

"No, they are not capable of tricks," said Captain Roadstrum. "Let's get out of here for a while."

They got onto their stone slabs, rubbed their feet, and lurched out into the sunny soft air. The big women of the Laestrygonians were rising on stone slabs with huge jars of water for the giants, and Margaret the houri came with a pretty fair sized jug for the men.

"I will *not* let those cows bring water to you," she announced. "I bring the water to you myself. Hey, I've been killing some of those cow-women, one at a time, and unbeknownst to the others. Bjorn is right. This killing can be a lot of fun."

"So far this is the oddest day I've ever half spent," growled mighty Roadstrum, as he took his noontime ease on a stone floating in the low sky. "I don't understand the setup here at all. There is neither rime nor reason to it."

"I bring rime," Bjorn called in his loud voice. "Who needs reason?"

The grinning Bjorn slid his slab near to that of Roadstrum. Then he blew a solid note on a jug flute that he had between his legs. And then he declaimed:

*"The little bug has got the glitter eyes of him,  
You can't go by the pepper-picking size of him.*

*We look and hoot, 'That must be only half of him.'  
We laugh at him and laugh at him and laugh at him.*

*He be tall eater and a taller topian,  
No mind the little fellow's microscopian.*

*We pitch a party, sling the dangest dangeroo.  
Whoop, whoop and holler! He's a hero-hangeroo!"*

"What in hound-dog heaven is come over you, Bjorn?" Roadstrum asked in wonder. "Is that Laestrygonian verse?"

"Sure is not, little Roadstrum. That is Road-Storm verse, your own high epic. We make verses of it here also, as do folks everywhere. It is so long a time since we have had a certified hero in our place. You think we be so nice to you if we do not know who you are?"

The grinning giant dripped rivers of sweat onto the earth below, and his voice was full of thunder. Roadstrum remembered an old mythology where the first rain was the sweat of such a deity-hero, and the first thunder was such a voice. But now Bjorn changed and became all business.

"The noon is over!" he cried in a voice that made big cracks in a high cloud. "All back and make ready for the fight. Scoot, little men, back to your haven. Last one there gets killed!"

The last one back to the haven was Crewman Ursley, and he was killed at the very entrance of it.

Now came the rocks thrown by the slab-hands of the giants, rocks near as big as the men themselves. This was the mortar attack from cover. Crewman Mundmark was struck by such a rock. His limbs were unstrung, he burst asunder, and he died. Crewman Snow was similarly slain, but in louder fashion. The rock didn't strike him full but it sheared near half of him away. He howled and roared and screamed. Crewman Snow was very reluctant about the dying business, but he died nevertheless.

And yet the men were killing possibly two for one. They blasted arms off the giants that were reared back to throw. They blasted every one dead who ventured into the open. And there hadn't been many giants, or men.

"How many of us left?" Captain Roadstrum asked as though he were counting patrols and batteries and battalions.

"I see myself. I see you," said Captain Puckett. "I do not see any others."

"How many of you dog-hearted giants are left?" Roadstrum called loudly.

"Only myself," came the strong voice of Bjorn. "Come out the two of you and we will see who is dog-hearted."

"I go," said big Captain Puckett. "I always did want to die a hero's death."

Puckett went out with his blaster blasting. He smashed rocks open as though they were eggs. He knocked an arm and shoulder off of Bjorn when he had only half a shot at him, and the happy laughter of Bjorn over it was one of the great things.

"I will show you a hero, a hero," Captain Puckett swore.

"Dead hero, dead hero, come to me," Bjorn jibed. They were out of Roadstrum's sight now. The sun was in his eyes as he peered, and it would soon be dusk.

There were a dozen more blasts, a dozen more hooting laughs almost too big even for a giant, and then a last blood-clabbering scream.

"The little boy-man was a hero after all," Bjorn called. "Shall I toss your dead hero to you, Roadstrum?"

"Toss him," Roadstrum called. And the body of Puckett, impaled on the great spear, came sailing in. Roadstrum caught him somewhat, stretched him out, and gave him the hero's salute.

"Hurry!" Bjorn called with some urgency. "The sun sets, and we two are left."

"What is the hurry?" Roadstrum called. "I fight well in the dark."

"No, no!" the giant cried. "Be you not difficult! All must be dead before the sun goes down. Hurry out and be the hero too."

"A hero I am not, Bjorn," Roadstrum blared. "Alive I will bide a while, and it is now my brain against yours."

But Roadstrum lied, hardly realizing it. Some time before, in the time of the ten-year war, Roadstrum had caught the heroes' disease during one of the campaigns. It is infectious, and it stays with one to some degree forever. It usually took him every third day along about sundown, coming with a sudden chill and a quick steep fever. Always he had taken precautions so that he would do nothing rash while the heroic fever was upon him. But this was the third day at sundown and the fever came suddenly; and this time Roadstrum had not taken precautions.

He jerked Bjorn's great spear out of the body of Captain Puckett. He selected a stone slab, rubbed his feet on it, and veered out of the haven.

"Up and at it, Bjorn of the dog-liver!" he called boldly. "We fight your way to the death."

"Have we time?" the giant cried. "Thunder! Have we time? The sun goes down."

"In the high air it shines yet," Roadstrum called. "Up and at it, Bjorn."

There were two giants laughing in the sky! Roadstrum had turned himself into a giant with as boisterous and happy a laugh as the best ogre of them all. Now they came at each other on wild pitching stone slabs, the most rampaging stallions ever. Bjorn had his second spear, shorter but heavier than the first, and Roadstrum had found the strength to heft and haft the great spear itself. A pass, and both were slashed and gouged, and each left a hunk of meat on the other's spear.

"Higher," Bjorn called, "the sun fails. Faster, the final sortie. Up, up, Roadstrum, the sun must catch both our spears."

They went up very high. The sun was on the bloody points of both their spears, and all the world below was dark. Then they charged, each on his snorting stone slab that neighed and surged and had come alive. Roadstrum caught big Bjorn in the middle of the belly, where it is mortal to an ogre. To swerve then, in the millionth of a second! But there was not time to swerve. Bjorn's eyes laughed at Roadstrum as he died, and his heavy spear had the man through the center breast. Roadstrum's slab was the higher, and it sliced Bjorn through at the groin. The two heroes came together in death, transfixed on each other's spears, and fell a very very great way to the ground that was now in night darkness.

"Ah, well, I died a hero and a giant," Roadstrum said, for every man is allowed one sentence after death.

So now all were dead on both sides. It had been close, though. For a while it seemed that they were not going to make it. The giants had told the men that the fun is all spilled out and lost if all are not dead by the fall of night.

Dead and splattered. Gathered up and carried. By what? By whom?

But even in dreams *they* are not. They are on the other side of dreams. It was incredible enough that one of them could carry Roadstrum, a giant among men. But how could one carry Bjorn, who was a giant among giants?

Death is for a long time. Those of shallow thought say that it is forever. There is, at least, a long night of it. There is the forgetfulness and the loss of identity. The spirit, even as the body, is unstrung and burst and scattered. One goes down to the death, and it leaves a mark on one forever.

"Come to the breakfast!" boomed a voice so vast that it shook the world and all the void between the worlds. "Come to the breakfast!"

And there was another voice rilling on in saucy silver, that of Margaret the houri.

"I see that I am going to have to make some changes here," Margaret was shrilling angrily. "You eat, you fight, you die, you sleep, you wake up, and you eat again. But where does that leave the women? You are going to have to find an hour every day for them."

"Yes, yes," said Skel and Mus and Fleyta and Belja and Toa and Glethi and Vinna and Ull and Raetha, and all those other Laestrygonian dames with the more difficult names, "you are going to have to find one hour in the day for us."

"I think for a long time there is something missing," big Bjorn was saying, "but there is no time for anything else. We breakfast, and then we fight till all are killed, and then it is night. We are dead all the night, and then we sleep for a very little while at first sun. Then is it time for breakfast again. Look yourself at the sundial, little witch-child. Can you see any time for anything else on the sundial?"

Margaret the houri lifted a boulder larger than herself and smashed the sundial.

"I will make a new dial," she said. "I will make it different and with an extra hour. There has to be time for the women. And now I will instruct the women on what they will do in that hour."

"How did I get back here, Maggy?" Roadstrum asked the houri. "Was I not dead?"

"Of course you were. And I was Valkyrie last night (the others showed me how to be one) and I carried you back from the battlefield. Sprained a shoulder doing it."

"But how was I dead and now I am alive?" Roadstrum persisted.

"Do you not understand yet, little Roadstrum?" Crewman Birdsong asked him. "Hey, it was a rollick, wasn't it?"

Little Roadstrum? From Crewman Birdsong? Roadstrum was *not* little, he was a giant of a man, he topped Crewman Birdsong by a head.

No he didn't. He didn't come up to the nether ribs of Birdsong. Crewman Birdsong had

become a giant, as had Crewman Fairfeather.

"Why has it happened to you two, and not to great Roadstrum and to great Myself?" Captain Puckett asked, for now he was alive and awake again.

"Some have it and some do not," said Crewman Birdsong. "You two, and the most of you, must have had mental reservations when you went into the thing. I thought all along that you fellows weren't as joyous and wholehearted in the battle as you might have been. If you let yourselves go completely today and enter into it with a happy howling heart, then I believe you can make it."

"But what is it? How does it happen? Where are we really?" Roadstrum asked.

"No? You really don't know? Valhalla, of course. Here the heroes fight to the death every day in glorious and cloud-capping battle. And every morning they are reborn to fight and die again. I can see where it's going to be a lot of fun."

"Doesn't it become kind of tiresome after a while, Bjorn?" Roadstrum asked the giant of giants.

"Why no, not really, Roadstrum. You know how it is with everything. They all pall a little after the centuries begin to mount. But this is better than most things. Stay with us; you will be a mighty fighter yet."

"We have a choice to make, Captain Puckett," said Roadstrum.

"Let us first go see if we *do* have a choice, Captain Roadstrum," said Puckett.

They gathered their men, except Crewmen Birdsong and Fairfeather, who had already become giants and who would remain in any case. They went down to their hornet crafts to see if anything at all could be done to repair them on this world, to see if the mad boy Hondstarfer had left anything of them.

Well, at least the shells of the hornets were still there, but there was a great amount of the works scattered around on the rocky ground.

"I couldn't see any use for a lot of that stuff so I left it out," said the boy Hondstarfer. "They will both fly now, but one of them will break down again after a little while. This one here is perfect and will fly forever. On the other one I made a lot of mistakes. You'll have more room in them now if you ever use them. Those long things I took out were what was taking up all the room."

"Those are the main drives," said Crewman Boniface.

"Ah well, the ships are fixed," the boy said, "but one of them will break down again."

"They will fly?" asked Crewman Humphrey. "Men, men, let's go then! I've had enough of this place where they stuff you full of bull and then hunt you down and kill you every day."

"No, of course they won't fly," said Roadstrum. "How could they fly without their main drives?"

"Oh, they'll fly," the boy Hondstarfer said. "I fixed the clumsy things. Did my father Bjorn not tell you that I was mechanically inclined?"

"However could you fix such intricate machinery with nothing but those seven stone hammers there?" Captain Puckett asked.

"I didn't, I couldn't, I only thought that I could. I had to go get that."

They hadn't noticed it before. They'd thought it was a tree. Hondstarfer hadn't fixed their hornets with those seven little stone hammers. He'd used a *big* stone hammer. Was it ever big!

"Hey, I want to be a hobo," Hondstarfer cried as Deep John the Vagabond fluttered down on his favorite slab. "How do I go about it, Deep John?"

"It isn't like it used to be," said Deep John. "It all seems much smaller and narrower since we took to the skies. The spacious days of it were on World in the old railroad time. But you'd need a time machine to get back there, Hondstarfer."

"Oh, I've got a time machine," the boy said, "also a space-racer. I think I'll go to World and turn myself back and be an old-time railroad hobo."

"Well, what is the choice?" Puckett asked. "Do we try to fly in something that can't possibly fly? Or do we stay to be killed again and again and again?"

"Wait, wait," called Margaret the houri. "I'm going with you. Those giants aren't as much fun as I thought they'd be. You get tired of them after a while."

"That's true, that's true," said Roadstrum. "We have our choice. Let's make it. I was a giant for my moment. I can be one again if I'm called on to be. Shall we say that Hondstarfer could not fix these things to fly? Shall we say that the stone slabs of this world could not fly? Load in whoever wants to go! We fly! We fly! We've flown on less."

And to their own amazement they began to load in.

“Wait, wait,” big Bjorn called coming down to them. “Will you not stay to the breakfast?”

“We will not stay to the breakfast,” Roadstrum said.

“You will do better today,” Bjorn stated. “You begin to be giants. Today you will be able to eat a whole bull, Roadstrum.”

“I am able to, yes, Bjorn, but I do not want to eat a whole bull. I can be the giant whenever I wish, and I am afflicted with the heroes’ disease that smites me every third day about sundown. But we will fly! There are skies we have not seen yet! There are whole realms still unvisited by us. We will not be penned in even a giants’ pen. We fly!”

“In that case, Roadstrum—ah—it is an embarrassing thing to say—in that case there is one thing we must do before you leave.”

“Do it then,” said Roadstrum.

“We do not want to be overrun with amateurs,” the giant Bjorn explained. “If everybody knew how much fun it was here, then everybody would come. We want only such fine farers as yourselves who come by high chance. You must promise never to tell anybody how much fun it is here.”

“We promise,” said Roadstrum. “We will never tell anybody how much fun it is here.”

“And there is one small thing that we must do to make sure that you keep your promises,” Bjorn added.

“And what is that?”

“CUT YOUR BLOODY TONGUES OUT!”

Two of the Laestrygonian giants grabbed each man and threw him down; and a third, stepping on his man’s throat to force his tongue out, grabbed it and pulled it out still further to its absolute extent, and then cut it out with a stone knife, roots and all.

Here was the creamingest pain ever. Here was utter frustration. Who may battle and defy and get revenge when deprived of tongue and voice? And besides, they were near dead from the loss of blood, near a more final death than that of the night before.

But they crawled and dragged themselves in, gagging and green, and loaded dying into their crafts, with Roadstrum going last.

“Here is one final thing beyond the final,” said Bjorn. “—Ah, I am truly sorry to see you looking so green and puny—one very last surety you must give before you tumble dying into your boat. You must write on this paper that my little boy has here, for my boy Hondstarfer, as you may not know, can read. You will use your finger and the blood from the roots of your tongue. You will write ‘I will never tell anyone how much fun it is in this place.’”

And mighty Roadstrum wrote with his finger and his tongue’s-roots blood “I will never tell anyone how much fun it is in this place.”

*They took to air all bloodily and retchingly,  
They made new tongues, but didn’t make them fetchingly,*

*And flew through chartless skies where none had fled before;  
Whatever came, at least they’d all been dead before.*

*But one thing worked, whatever else might nix the things,  
That hammer-handling kid had really fixed the things.*

*All bloody luck they ever got away like that,  
They sure did never want another day like that!*

*And Roadstrum shucked another layer fretfully:  
One gives up giantizing most regretfully.*

## CHAPTER THREE

*All lost in space, the hide-bound inner side of it,  
With roaring rocks that gave them quite a ride of it—*

*Ah better Dobie's Hole than such vortexicon  
That stoned them all and spooked the cowboy lexicon!*

*They guessed wrong guess and reveled in unheedingly  
(Where clashing rocks turned strange and roared stampedingly),*

*And ate High Cow, and fell beneath the curse of it,  
And bantered suns, and ended up the worse for it.*

*They had the horns and hump and very prime of it,  
And rather lost themselves about that time of it.*

Ibid

THEY CAME AMONG the clashing rocks, "the rocks wandering." It was a thick asteroid belt moving at a respectable speed, and it was necessary that the hornets match its direction and speed for safety. Besides, since they were lost, they might as well go where the rocks were going.

The wandering rocks were mostly about the size of the hornets themselves, rounded and not too rough. They were thickly clustered, one every thousand meters or so. "And we called that thick!" the men said later. They were gray bumbling things in the gray twilight, and some of the men got out and rode on them.

"They've got eyes on them," said Crewman Oldfellow.

"Probably the mica glint," said Captain Roadstrum.

"No, no, not like that at all. Eyes like a calf, like a buffalo calf that I saw at a World zoo once. I look sideways at one of them, he looks sideways at me, and we see each other's eyes. But when I look at one of them directly, his eyes disappear."

"Ah well, maybe your eyes disappear also," said Roadstrum. "You'd be the last to know."

The clashing rocks kept their distances and positions pretty well; and yet it seemed as though they became somehow more numerous, as though they spawned when the men were not looking.

Roadstrum sent his men out to mark and number the one hundred nearest rocks. And then they rode along and studied the traveling rocks for an equivalent day.

"There are two forty-nines," Crewman Lawrence reported then, "and we numbered only one of each number."

"Then I have bumlbers for men and they are not able to count to one hundred," said Roadstrum angrily.

"That is not so," Crewman Bramble protested. "I made the dies myself and I made them true. But now there are three number nines each bearing my genuine and original die of that number."

"There are five number sevens at least," said Crewman Crabgrass. "It sure does get crowded now."

"Do you hear snorting, Roadstrum?" Captain Puckett called from his hornet. ("False tongue, false tongue," warned the communicator.)



"Space noises, Puckett," Roadstrum called back. ("False tongue," warned the machine.) "And they become even noisier," said Roadstrum. "But would you call it snorting? Well yes, I guess you would. Puckett, where in glare-eyed space are all these rocks coming from? And what is the excitement and fear that seems to be running loose among them?" ("False tongue," the communicator warned again.)

The communicator always gave this warning now, whenever a man spoke from one hornet to another. The "False Tongue" sensor had been built into the communicator from the beginning as guard against space things that may counterfeit the human voice and so interfere and subvert. But now all the crewmen had false manufactured tongues in their heads, and their communicators warned them against themselves.

All except Deep John the hobo. Deep John had in some manner escaped the attention of the Laestrygonian giants at that time. "I was the only one able to keep a civil tongue in my head," Deep John liked to say.

Margaret the houri had also kept her own tongue, but the communicator called "False tongue" at her nevertheless. The machine read her as something not quite human, and her tongue also.

"It is snorting, Roadstrum," Captain Puckett called again. "It is snorting and bawling and trampling. Hear the heavy hooves of it!" (False tongue," said the thing.)

"We spooked them, Captain Roadstrum," Crewman Threefountains said mysteriously. "Some of these breeds spook easy. Man, are we ever going to have a rumble!"

"They are perverse roaring rocks," said Crewman Bramble, "and I do not believe that the spherical is their real form. And the closest one, rubbing on our very windows there and threatening to break in, bears the number three and five-eighths, and we made no fractional-number dies; and yet it is a die made by my own hand; no one could counterfeit me there."

They went another equivalent day, and the churning rocks were like to crush them all. "Each of the pawing rocks has a brand as well as a die number," Crewman Trochanter said then. "It's a sun-brand, but I don't know what sun."

"There's dust," said Roadstrum, "prairie dust, but how could there be dust out here? And our scan-can reads that there is a break in the thing, half an equivalent day ahead. We'll break out of this then, no matter what we break into."

"The way out of one known fusillade of rocks is Dobie's Hole," said Crewman Crabgrass, "and the hole is not bad. But the way out of the other known congress of clashing rocks is the Vortex. It apparently leads to sure death; nobody has ever come out of it again."

"It's death here," said Roadstrum. "We will take the side break when we come to it. We are lost, and we will not know whether it is Dobie's Hole or the Vortex. Hey, what curious things are you men doing with the ropes there?"

"We don't know," the men said. "We just found ourselves doing it. We have a compulsion to form the ropes into such running loops as these. There is something we must do with them when the time comes."

"Roadstrum," Captain Puckett called from his hornet, "the jostling rocks have gone insane! What's the name of this madness?" ("False tongue," warned the communicator.)

Deep John the hobo took the communicator and called from Roadstrum's hornet to Puckett's:

"The name of it is stampede."

"I think so too," Puckett answered. "Roadstrum, my men are making running loops in ropes, and they don't know why." ("False tongue.")

"So are mine, Puckett," cried mighty Roadstrum. "It will offend someone when it is done; but what is another measure of trouble added to what we already have?" ("False tongue," cried the machine.)

It was as though they were coming to a great river, and the stampeding stones were filling it up and running over it on the backs of their bogged comrades. But at this river in the sky (for half an equivalent day had passed), there was a second ford breaking off hard to the left. The hornets took the branching, coming into a region where the rocks pressed them less hardly. But now the men broke out of the hornets and began to do things clear outside of reason.

Crewmen Crabgrass and Clamdigger went for the horns of a little calf-rock they had selected, a rock even smaller than a hornet, not above five times the size of a bull elephant. And they had the thing by the horns, but how will a small asteroid have horns?

Then all the mad crewmen from both hornets were outside, shouting and making ritual

motions with their ropes. They flew flying loops around that calf-rock, more than a dozen of them. They jerked it along their own new way, both the hornets dogging it. The men all gave voice to varieties of barking and hooting, and the calf-rock was bawling. The dust was deep and stifling and smelled of flint sparks.

"It's a thing too tall for my reason," Roadstrum slung out, "but I get the high excitement myself. We are pulled along at a great rate on our new course, but we will not let the doggie go! Onto it! Kill it! Skin it! Break it down! Devour it!"

They were out of the concourse of rocks now, except for the calf-rock whose neck they had broken and which died. They had escaped from one of the known fusillades of rocks, and their way of escape was not Dobie's Hole. It was the Vortex.

Nevertheless, the men, working dangerously, had begun to dismember the calf-rock, and some of them had lit space-primus fires to roast it.

"The horns and the hooves to Captain Roadstrum," Crewman Threefountains roared, "and the fat of the hump to Captain Puckett."

"What is it all, Roadstrum, what is it?" Puckett called.

"False tongue," warned the communicator.

"Oh shut up!" Roadstrum told the communicator. "Crew man Bramble, disassemble the bogus-intrusion safeguard. It drives me crazy."

"All right," said Bramble, and he quickly disassembled it.

"I don't know what it is, Puckett," Roadstrum called then, "but there's something about the aroma as they begin to roast the meat. A space-primus fire really has no odor, so how should it smell to me like sage-brush and buffalo-chips? Why should the meat smell to me like buffalo meat roasting, when I never smelled buffalo meat? The closest I ever came to it was my grandfather telling of eating it when he was a boy, at a rodeo on the Fourth of July at the old Hundred and One Ranch. And how is it that the men have got such magnificent horns and hooves off a round rough rock?"

"It's one of the sacred cattle of the sun we have killed," came the voice of Puckett. "We knew before we were born that this was forbidden. Now we must die the fiery death for the offense. You have the lead hornet, Roadstrum. Turn into the near sun with it, and I will follow. Let us be consumed by fire. There is no more hope for us."

"You're out of your wits, Puckett. What cattle of what sun?"

"The sun so great that it is known as *the* sun, Roadstrum. It is the nearest sun to us. Let us turn into it at once and be consumed for our sacrilege!"

"Puckett, if I had one of Hondstarfer's stone hammers here I'd fix your head for you. You're gone daft!"

"What, Roadstrum? I was outside for a moment trying to figure this thing out. Holy cow, it's an odd one! I heard you talking as I came back in."

"Puckett, you were giving me a balleyowl about the cattle of the sun and telling me we must turn into this nearest sun and be consumed."

"I was not, Roadstrum! Curse that sleazy little sun! Someone is trying to call us to our deaths. We'll not go into that little sun, and we can't go back through the stampeding rocks. It was the other sort of false tongue talking to you, not me. We're into the Vortex for good, so let's provision for it. Come out and feast, Roadstrum! Ten men couldn't eat the bull-hump of this calf, a hundred men couldn't eat the loins. Bring out a few kilos of pepper and a firkin of Ganymede hot-sauce."

"Curse that sniveling little sun, Puckett. For time out of mind and belly I've never seen such a thing as this!"

Did they ever carve up that big young bull! They were into the Vortex itself, going at unlawful and unnatural speed, caught by a force that none had ever broken, but they weren't going hungry into it.

They feasted on that big carcass that had seemed to be a rock. They questioned nothing. They were going at a speed where all the onrushing stars appeared violet color ("Lavender," said Crewman Crabgrass. "Lavender world laughs with you," said Crewman Trochanter), where all sequence was destroyed, where any answers would have to come before the questions.

The space-primus fire had become a pungent campfire. Crewman Threefountains played on his harmonica as the crewmen still gorged on the offworldly beef. Then they had branding-iron coffee from somewhere, and horse whisky. They had left the sniveling little sun and were going into a vaster black sun that had gobbled up its own light. It was night now, but it

wasn't an ordinary night.

And then they all fell to singing old campfire songs, whether this should be the end of them or not. They sang such old songs as "Eight-Eyed Lucy Jane" (it's plain she isn't plain), "I Lost My Heart on Wallenda World" (to a woolly Woomagoo), "The Green Veronica," and "The Grollanthropus and His Girl."

And they were rushing into the Vortex at two hundred million kilometers a second, and there was no possible way to break out of it.

*They felled a flipping doggie, made a bobble-up,  
And dropped to mokey sun that worked the gobble-up.*

*It swallowed time and flow in loins and liver yet,  
And voided all that ever gave the Giver yet.*

*One countered not with care or even laughter it,  
It drew in whole and pulled the hole in after it.*

*Use but a thumb to gull the gulping glutton there!  
That hammer-handling kid had put a button there!*

Ibid

"I always wanted to study an involuted, massive, black-giant sun," Crewman Bramble said. "I dreamed as a young man how interesting it would be to have plenty of time to study one and at close range. We will have the time of our life for it now and a very close range. I say it all again, but I have a false tongue in my head in two different senses. Roadstrum, I never wanted so little to do a thing in my life!"

"The equivalent-day recorder has gone crazy," said Roadstrum. "Look at the days flip over. Why, Bramble, there's nine days passed while we talk here."

"That idiot kid Hondstarfer must have meddled with it as he did with everything else on the crafts," Bramble guessed. "Still, it's peculiar that it should begin to malfunction after all this time."

"Captain Puckett," Roadstrum called over the communicator, "has the equivalent-day recorder gone crazy on your craft?"

"Yep, gone crazy," Puckett answered. "We've been amusing ourselves with it. We've got to amuse ourselves with something as we drop to our deaths. Do you know, Roadstrum, according to this thing, I've aged a year in the last baseline hour? Hey, this would make a man old fast if he went by it, wouldn't it?"

"It's a damned dumb thing that the equivalent-day recorders should go wrong on both hornets at the same time," Roadstrum growled.

"It was a damned dumb kid we had meddling with our equipment," Bramble complained. "But so far we've figured out a purpose for everything he did, except the equivalent-day recorder now, and the *Dong* button."

The *Dong* button was just that, a big green button with the word *Dong* engraved on it. You pushed it, and it went *dong*. Well, that was almost too simple. Should there not be a deeper reason for it? And the small instruction plate over it didn't add much. It read: "Wrong prong, bong gong."

"There's no more to the button than is apparent?" Roadstrum asked Crewman Bramble.

"Yes, there is more. Everything on our hornets works by the static-repulsion principle now, you know. And the *Dong* button contains one half of a static-repulsion couple. But wherever in wall-eyed space the other half of that couple is, I don't know. It isn't on the hornets."

Well, they were well-fed by the space-calf that had masqueraded as a rock until they had slaughtered it. They were well provisioned by its leavings. They were rested and well, and they were falling to their sure deaths.

So the men busied themselves, or they did not, according to their natures. They had fun variously. And now and again one of them returned to one of the crazy equivalent-day recorders.

"Look, look," Crewman Crabgrass chortled. "I'm a month older just while I was in the john. You guys always did say I took too long there. And I'm two years older than I was when I finished my third breakfast a while ago."

"A man could live a lifetime every two days by that thing," Crewman Snow laughed.

But the crewmen laughed less loudly when they discovered (about the time that the equivalent-day recorder had racked up five years since the beginning of its malfunction) that they had all aged about five years in appearance during those short hours.

Thereafter they whistled softly and spookily and began to look at the recorder with something like frightened awe. And they looked at each other furtively and did not meet each other's eyes.

A little later, Crewman Mundmark died of heart stoppage. He hadn't been too old a man, and he had kept in pretty good shape. But he had lived the violent years of a spaceman, and with twenty years suddenly piled on top of that (for it was about twenty years now) it was no great wonder that he should die.

There were balding pates and graying heads popping out all over the place. Crewman Ursley lost three fingers suddenly. There was nothing happened to them. Suddenly they were gone. A bandage bloomed briefly where the three fingers had been, and then there was only old scar tissue. And Ursley gazed at his changed hand in understandable amazement.

"Whence have I this sudden, great, old scar-gash on my cheek?" Roadstrum croaked out baffled. "When have I lost me my fine right eye, and how is it that I find myself carrying that eye (in pickled form) in my pocket?"

"These are all incidents of the lives we would have lived out were we not falling into the blind black sun," Crewman Clamdigger gave the opinion. "These are the losses and mutilations that we would suffer in our normal lives, and they show on us here as we come to these equivalent years in our fall into the Vortex."

"There was an old World movie named 'Death Train' of which I forget the plot but remember the impression," said Crewman Crabgrass. "And at the end of it they were in a runaway train going into a long tunnel to their deaths. So are we."

"It reminds me of a freight train I caught out of Waterloo, Iowa one night about three hundred years ago," said Deep John the Vagabond. "Man, that train did have an eerie mournful sound to it, and the clicking of the rails—why I can hear the same clicking of the rails now."

"So can we all," said Roadstrum, "but how would there be rails clicking when we are going at a thousand times the speed of light?"

"Roadstrum," Puckett called from his hornet in a much-aged voice, "I've turned into a bald-headed, pot-bellied, crabby old man with no teeth and not very much vision. I don't like it."

"I don't like my own aging, Puckett. Have any of your men died?"

"Yes, about half. A good thing too. They're not much good for anything when they get to that age. Roadstrum, this will have to be goodbye. I'm too old and stove in to get outside the sphere these last two years—ah—that is, the last thirty minutes. It's happening faster now, you know."

"Myself, I will try it once more," said Captain Roadstrum.

Roadstrum went outside the hornet sphere. He had always liked to go outside, but now it was unpleasant and very difficult. He could not comprehend that positive black light nor the distortions of space. With the reversal of the curvature, the turning inside-out of mass and moment, it seemed that they were already inside the bulk of the black sun, but they rushed forever faster into the deep Vortex.

Roadstrum barely made it back inside. Still, he was proud of himself.

"I always said I'd live to be a hundred," he boasted. "Holy Cow, am I not a ramrod straight and imposing man at ninety-four! A Gray Eminence! Maggy, has it any effect on you? What does that mirror you are so busy with tell you?"

"Really, Captain Roadstrum, twenty or even twenty-one is not a bad age. I study myself as I come to that. No, I do not age as quickly as you do, but I age. I like me when I'm young. I like me when I'm old. I bet I even like me when I get to be twenty-two or even twenty-three."

"What, all the men dead except Hobo John?"

"Yes, all the others, Roadstrum, and now it catches up to me also. I had won a delay some centuries ago, actually I won the delay in a gambling game with a certain Power, but now both my basic and my extended life come to an end," said Deep John.

"It hasn't been a bad life, but it was rather disappointing that the last two-thirds of it should pass away in less than an equivalent day. Seems unfair, but we did kill that calf, and perhaps we shouldn't have. We should have known that such odd cattle would have belonged to someone. What, dying, Hobo John?"

"Might as well, Roadstrum," said Deep John the Vagabond, and he died.

"Be there any living on the other hornet?" Roadstrum called.

"None but me," came the crackling old voice of Crewman Oldfellow. "And I'm about to turn in and die myself. It's funny, Captain Roadstrum, they called me Oldfellow because I was the youngest man in the crews, and the name stuck. And somehow it never seemed to me that I'd really get old. I got to die now, and I doubt if we'll ever meet again. But if they *do* ever let you visit up our way, look me up."

"I will, Oldfellow. Pleasant death to you."

Margaret the houri had just made a little cake.

"Happy birthday, Captain Roadstrum," she called out cheerfully now.

"What, what Mag, what's this?"

"You just turned a hundred, Captain. Eat it."

"I will, Mag. Say, did you ever notice that a man gives off a pretty strong odor for about a second when he dies. Well, they're all gone but me, and now I go. It was nice, but shorter than I expected."

And he went into death snooze. Why not? He was a hundred and eight at least by the time he had finished the cake. It was going faster now.

"You are like all the others," said Margaret. "Why did I think you might be different?"

"Snuff, snuff, snooze," Roadstrum breathed in his death slumber.

"To boil a lobster, one takes first a lobster— Will not that rouse you again, Roadstrum? 'Passed the last possible moment,' Deep John would say, and now he is dead. Are you dead also, Roadstrum?"

"Mighty near." Roadstrum spoke out of his death sleep. "Leave me in peace."

"What was that word, Roadstrum? Peace? It's a fine word for the mob, but it will gag the one man in a million. Shall I say it again, Captain? Peace."

"I *am* one man in a million," Roadstrum protested out of his deep, old-man sleep. "Maggy, it does gag me. Why, I'll erupt out of the grave and stage my own resurrection."

And he did manage to sit up, looking very much like Lazarus.

"How old am I now, Mag?" he asked in his reedy voice.

"A hundred and twenty, Captain, and it goes faster."

"That's not a bad age for a real man. What went wrong? There is a way out of everything, but somewhere we took the wrong turning, the wrong prong."

Then he looked at the *Dong* by his side, the button that the boy Hondstarfer had put there. "Wrong prong, bong gong," said its instruction plate. Roadstrum pushed this button as he had many times before, and it went *dong* as it always did.

Then Roadstrum fell back once more into what seemed to be his death slumber. But now there was somehow a change in the low purr, in the cosmic sound.

"I had better just hop over to the other hornet and push the button there too," Margaret said, and she did.

Yes, a fellow smells a little high for the short second just before he comes back to life, just as he did for a short second after he died. Margaret snuffled her nose at Crewman Oldfellow, and left. She went back to Roadstrum's hornet. It was her regular place. Everything was much as it had been before, except that the equivalent-day recorder had begun to run backwards as soon as the *Dong* button had matched the other half of its coupler with something in the black sun. And pretty soon Roadstrum came out of his death slumber on the same side he had gone into it.

"Mighty rum thing, Maggy, mighty rum. You remember what the high poet said:

*The eating, aging, empty ogre got 'em there;  
They fell into the well that had no bottom there.*

Let us expunge that couplet, Maggy, for it was writ of ourselves, and we are entitled to edit our own epic. Perhaps the black sun did get us, but in the time reversal thing he did not. This is a most handy button. Now we can back out of anything we get into, as long as we are with

the hornets.”

It was fun watching the men return. There was something comic in their difficulty in accepting the thing. “You’re kidding. It couldn’t really happen like that,” they all said. They were a bunch of cranky old men, and then they began to get younger as hope welled up in them. They came back, every last one of them. Roadstrum had his rogue eye back in his head, unpickled and serene. The scar-gash left his cheek. And Crewman Ursley had his three fingers back on his hand.

But there is a weirdness in almost all actions done backwards. It wasn’t as much fun regurgitating the space-calf as it had been eating it. And they did have a blue hell of a time putting that thing back together. Roadstrum hated to give up the magnificent horns and hooves, but there was no way out of it. You go on that backwards jag and you’d better expect the improbable.

Certain bodily functions are unusual and almost unpleasant when done in reverse; but to get out of a hole like they were in, you will put up with a lot.

They were back among the clashing rocks, “the rocks wandering.” They were out of those rocks again on the other side of them. They were lost in space again; but the equivalent-day recorder was running normally now, in the right direction and apparently at the right speed.

“Whyever did we choose that path into the clashing rocks over all other possible paths?” Roadstrum asked in amazement.

“Give a look at the other possible paths, Captain Roadstrum, as you looked before,” said Crewman Crabgrass.

“I look. I shudder,” groaned Roadstrum. “I’m not sure but what the terrible course we just backed out of is not the best one. Horror, horrors everywhere we look.”

“One thing, Roadstrum,” Captain Puckett called from his hornet. “We didn’t lose any time on that side trip. We came out at exactly the same moment that we went in.”

(“False voice,” warned the communicator, “false voice.”)

## CHAPTER FOUR

*He won a thousand worlds, and made the bums of them,  
And mocked the Gentry for the broken thumbs of them.*

*He propped the Universe, but propped it jerkily,  
For mighty Atlas after Georgie Berkeley.*

*He climbed the Siren-zo and made a clown of it,  
And plucked the high note from the very crown of it.*

*Hold hard with heels and hands and crotch and cuticle  
For episodes becoming epizootical.*

Ibid

“I BELIEVE that I have found a sure way to beat the games,” Roadstrum said. And all the men groaned.

“Give it up, Captain Roadstrum,” Crewman Clamdigger begged. “The smartest gambling men in all the worlds are here; and a mental man you are not.”

“This is a sure thing,” Roadstrum insisted.

“Give it up, Captain,” Crewman Trochanter pleaded. “There are men here with luck growing out of their fingers and toes, luck in their eyes and voices, in their minds and in their nether-minds, in their beards and in their bowels. And there is no man of us, even with false tongue, who can say ‘Lucky Captain Roadstrum’ without laughing. A lucky man you are not.”

They were down on Roulettenwelt, the gamblers’ world. This was the showiest of all worlds, and it was said that the streets there were paved with gold. Actually, only the Concourse, the Main Mall, the Royal Row, Broadway West, Vega, and Pitchman’s Alley were paved with gold, and these only in their central blocks, not over five thousands of meters of roadway in all.

And crewmen went into the big houses and watched the big gamblers; and they listened to the tall stories about them. There was Johnny Greeneyes, who could see every invisible marking on cards with his odd optics. There was Pyotr Igrovitch with the hole in his head. Pyotr was the most persistent suicide of them all. Following heavy losses in his youth he had shot himself through the head. It had not killed him, but the shot had carried away great portions of the caution and discretion lobes of his brain. The passage through his head had remained open, with pinkish flaps of flesh covering the holes fore and aft.

Now, whenever Pyotr suffered heavy losses, he jerked out his pistol and shot himself through the head. It was all for a joke; he always shot himself through the same passage; and the “brains” which he appeared to spew out the back opening with the shot were in reality only phlegm that had gathered in his head. But it was rather a weird thing when seen by one for the first time, and Pyotr very often killed spectators standing behind him.

There was the Asteroid Midas, a big-beaked bird of a gambler who could do things with card and dice and markers in his long talons that seemed unlawful. There was Sammy the Snake, who held his “hands” in his mouth, or in his little forked tongue darting around. The last man who accused Sammy of cheating and who made a grab for the hidden card lost his arm clear up to the shoulder. But the man still insisted that Sammy *did* have a hidden card,

that he, the man, had succeeded in grabbing it and even then held it in his hand, and that he would prove the thing if Sammy would only give him back his hand and his arm.

There was Willy Wuerfelsohn, Jr. Willy, as his father had been, was a devoted gambler. The father had died of starvation, being nineteen days and nights in a gambling session without eating or drinking. Willy senior was a well-liked man, and there were many people at his funeral mass.

"Requiem aeternam dona ei, Domine," the priest said rather near the end of it, "and now we pay special memorial to him by the one thing he loved most."

The priest and the pallbearers dealt out hands of hasty poker on the coffin and bet and played. They showed, and the winner was about to pull when a hand came up out of the coffin. It held, of course, a royal flush; and the hand raked the money into the coffin with him.

"—per misericordiam Dei requiescant in Pace," the priest concluded. Then they took him out and buried him. A remarkable man, as was his son.

"I know these are all the finest gamblers from all the worlds here," Roadstrum said. "So much the greater opportunity. This thing can't miss, can it, Crewman Bramble?"

"Of course it can miss," Bramble protested. "We haven't even tried it."

"No need to try it till the big money is down," Roadstrum said plainly. He went to the table with the biggest gamblers of them all and tried to get into the game.

"How much have you to bet, Captain?" Johnny Greeneyes asked him. "You may be a big space captain and still only a little man for money. This game is not for boys."

"I have two space hornets and one million Chancels d'or that is my mustering out pay, and ten thousand of same I had in tip from Maybe Jones," Roadstrum said with all the pride of a well-heeled space captain.

"Captain," said Johnny Greeneyes, "the lowest chip here costs one billion Chancels d'or. It was Maybe Jones himself who set this lower limit when he last played with us. It has to be that way, you understand, to keep the kids out. But there are lower tables for lower folk. There are even some where one may buy a marker for as little as a hundred thousand Chancels."

Roadstrum went grumbling and found a lower game. He bet his million and ten thousand Chancels and lost. Then he laughed, reversed it, bet them, and won.

He had in his pocket the *Dong* button from his hornet, and with this he could reverse any happening and run it through again with corrected hindsight. Crewman Bramble had completed the *Dong* with the other half of a floating couple, supposed to reverse things in any really dire emergency. And Captain Roadstrum, with his impassioned participation, turned every gamble into a dire emergency.

It worked again and again. Sometimes Roadstrum even won a hand without needing the button for replay. When he had several billion Chancels, he went to other tables and other sorts of games, testing it and making sure before he went to try the big boys.

The device worked again and again. At dicing, Roadstrum sometimes had to turn it back for as many as a dozen different throws to make his point, for he wasn't a lucky man. It worked perfect at roulette. That was simple one-repeat stuff. It worked well at roustabout poker. Roadstrum had more trouble at other poker games, the feedback of his own gaming affecting the betting and drawing of the other players. Sometimes he had to run it through twenty times before he won a hand; he wasn't a very good poker player.

It would seem that all this replaying took a lot of time, but it didn't. One goes into time, one backs out of it again, and time is as when one started. Nor did others even notice the *dong* of Roadstrum's button; all things in the sequence were forgotten by the others and remembered only by Roadstrum the principle.

Then Roadstrum went back to the table with the big gamblers. He convinced them that he was now a man of substance, and they played with him. Golganger was now in the game. Golganger was a creature of a species with a difficult name. He was peculiar in the extreme, and he had thirty thumbs on each hand. How that fellow could shuffle and deal.

But Roadstrum noticed with satisfaction that all thirty pair of Golganger's thumbs had been broken somewhere along the way. And that Asteroid bird had had his talons broken more than once, that was clear. Sammy the Snake had a crook in his forked tongue that he had not been born with, and all the men of them, Pyotr, Johnny Greeneyes, Willy Wuerfelsohn, had had their thumbs broken several times in their lives. On Roulettenwelt, as



on most of the worlds, a shifty dealer will finally be spotted; he will be dragged out by honest men, and they will break his thumbs painfully; and he cannot be a shifty dealer for another month or so.

"Ah, you gentry of the broken thumbs," Roadstrum mocked, "you have been taken before, all of you, and I will take you now. I work you like putty in the palm!"

They played, and Roadstrum won. The big gambling men smiled at him and played some more, and Roadstrum won some more. Then the big men began to play seriously. Roadstrum had to run one set through more than fifty times to beat Johnny Greeneyes on it. Roadstrum's own thumb was quite sore from pushing the *Dong* button so many times. And still Roadstrum won.

"You have won all the money we have with us," Pyotr Igrokovitch finally said, and he shot himself through the head. "It isn't really much money, but to keep the game going we will let it stand for a medium-sized world. All right, does everybody bet one medium-sized world?"

"You fellows really own worlds?" Roadstrum asked.

"Of course we do," said Sammy the Snake. "Money is only for the warm-up. The game doesn't start till the title-tokens to worlds come onto the table. Are you nervous, Little Captain of the Early Luck?"

"No, no, I'm not nervous. It's just that I never played for worlds before."

They played and Roadstrum won. He won and won. He won big. He owned more than a hundred worlds now. He had become a mogul in the universe. Many High-Space-Emperors have fewer worlds. Many Confederation Chiefs rule fewer.

"I be King Roadstrum now," he said proudly.

"King Roadstrum, I want to have a word with you," said Crewman Bramble.

"Yes, what is it, Bramble?" Roadstrum asked when they had gone apart to talk.

"I've been following the *Dong* button on the scope, Captain, that is, King," Bramble said. "The pulse becomes a little erratic. That Hondstarfer was an inventive kid, but he wasn't really a careful worker. The button should be worked over. There could be a failure."

"Keep watching it, Bramble. I want to make a couple of big grabs before I quit. If the pulse becomes too erratic, let me know."

Roadstrum went back to the table and continued to win. Johnny Greeneyes got green all over. The great crest-feathers of the Asteroid Midas wilted down as his spirits fell. Sammy the Snake was suffering the miseries, and there is nothing sicker than a sick snake. Pyotr shot himself through the head six times in quick succession, banged his empty pistol down on the table, and cursed.

"I quit," said Willy Wuerfelsohn, Jr. sullenly. "I've only three of four worlds left, and I'll need them to get back in a game in the morning."

"One thousand worlds," Roadstrum said. "I be High Emperor Roadstrum now."

"High Emperor Roadstrum, I want a word with you," said Crewman Bramble.

"This is it, boys," Roadstrum told the gamblers. "It has been a pleasure, and I don't know any man who wins so graciously as I do. —Well, Bramble, it was getting even more erratic, was it? Well, it was a good little button."

"No, no, Roadstrum, the pulse has cleared. It's working perfectly now. Go on with the game. Let the sky be the limit."

"I have won skies enough this day, and my eyes are so tired that I can hardly tell the green suits from the blue. Here, take little *Dong* and put him back in the hornet. And round up the men. We are off to visit other worlds, perhaps even some of the one thousand."

Crewman Bramble took the *Dong* button back to the hornet and began to round up the man. And great Roadstrum went down to the men's room as he had been meaning to do for some time.

"Here, here," he told the attendant. "I'm no commoner. I own a thousand worlds. Put tissue with the Emperor's Crest on it into the stall for me. I can use no less."

"Put a Chancel d'or into my hand and I will," said the attendant.

"Double or nothing," Roadstrum snapped

The attendant looped a coin and won. They doubled and doubled, and the attendant won. Roadstrum flipped a coin and still the attendant won. Roadstrum no longer had a *Dong* button in his pocket to reverse his calls with.

They cut cards for it, and the attendant continued to win.

"It's a hundred thousand Chancels now and a bit more," the attendant said. "Do you want to go ahead?"

"Sure, double you again. This time I win," said Roadstrum. But the attendant won.

"It's three hundred billion Chancels now," the attendant said; "do you want to keep on?"

"I'm about to the end of my cash," Roadstrum said. "How about title to a medium-sized world?"

"All right. I always wanted to own a world," the attendant said. The attendant won the world, then two, then four, then eight, then sixteen, then thirty-two, then sixty-four—

"But I don't have anything to worry about," Roadstrum said. "I only have to win once to come out of it." But it was the attendant who won and won and won.

"How many worlds did you say you had?" the attendant asked after a while.

"One thousand exactly."

"You owe me a thousand and twenty-four. Give me the titles to the one thousand, and sign this I.O.U. for twenty-four worlds. I can trust you to supply them in a reasonable time?"

"Yes, I'll win them, or buy them somehow, or conquer them. I am a man of my word; I will get you your worlds. Now please, put the Emperor's Crest tissue into the stall for me. I've certainly paid enough for it."

"Can't," said the attendant. "You're not an Emperor anymore. You've lost all your worlds. You're a commoner again. Use plain paper."

The attendant still owns those worlds today. He is High Emperor and he administers his worlds competently. He is a man of talent.

*A thing unseen is on its face unseeable;  
a being, savored not nor heard, unbe-able;*

*and be assured there's naught at all outside of us  
unless perceived by one or by a pride of us,*

*nor someone see it move it will not move at all,  
and damn! he had a husky guy to prove it all!*

Ibid

They were down on Kentron-Kosmon, an insignificant world. And yet, in the middle of Space-Port there (a cow pasture rather; it wasn't much of a spaceport) there was a nice plaque of electrum and on it was lettered: *This is the Exact Center of the Universe.*

Whether or not the plaque spoke the truth, this was the only world that had such a plaque. And the people of Kentron (there weren't very many of them; it wasn't a very big world) had a sort of cockey pride over their centrality, or over something.

But all the hornet men were flush (even Roadstrum had partly recouped his fortunes on Pieuvre World), and they wanted to have some fun. And Kentron had one fame besides its central location. *It is always Saturday night there*, was a proverb about the place.

"The fact is, we're so knob-headed dumb that we can't count the days," said a crinkly-haired young female, "so we call them all Saturday."

Well, you try to count them. A full day lasted about one equivalent minute. Imagine thirty seconds of daylight and thirty seconds of darkness! *If you want to do something in the dark, you'd better do it fast*, is another proverb of Kentron, and it has a certain challenge to it. On Kentron they had pace.

The men explored Kentron quickly. It was only about five kilometers around it. It had twenty-five high class hotels on it, and each man and one houri established himself in one of them as king or queen for the time of the visit. It had about five hundred blind-crows, pubs, winegardens, or beer-cellars, and several of them seemed to be lively. There was a lot of laughter and music going on; the people were fair of face and figure and quite friendly; the weather was almost perfect with its constant variety (one gets neither very hot nor very cold in thirty seconds); the whole little world seemed to be a series of continuing floor shows; and moreover there was challenge.

Almost central to the planet and to the universe, was a little carnival. There was the Corn-Crib (you had heard all the jokes before, you had met all the girls before somewhere, and you still liked them both); there was the Big Casino with its warning sign *Dong buttons disallowed* (the word had got around); there was a Wrestle-the-Alligator Tank, a tattoo parlor, and the

Booth. The big, good-natured-looking man in the booth was the Challenge, and they all felt it.

He winked them a great wink and the twenty-four men and one houri winked it back at him. He was a man of their own measure.

There were signs posted variously about the big fellow's booth. *I'm the guy who keeps it all going. If I weren't here, you wouldn't be here either. I know it all, I'm a smart-aleck. Loan-sharking and fencing. Any time I can't see you, you've had it. Country-style wrestling and scuffling done.*

There were, moreover, dozens of telescopes stuck around the booth, one big one pointing straight down into a hole clear through the planet; and the big man moved his eye rapidly from eyepiece to eyepiece, using them all. He had three sets of earphones on his ears, and he was surrounded by whole banks of instruments and scopes that he scanned constantly.

"Just what is the pitch here, friend?" Roadstrum asked the big fellow. "What is it that you do?"

"Anything and everything," said the big man. "I see them all. I do them all. I know them all. I throw them all."

"You don't look very deep to me," Roadstrum grumbled.

"Oh, I'm not. It isn't my profundity that makes me a mental marvel, it's the amazing detail of my perception. There is nobody else who can keep so many things on his mind at once. Ask me anything, anything at all, Roadstrum."

"Big fellow, if you know it all, then you can answer one small question that bothers me. We are on a very small world here; it should not have an atmosphere; it should not have a gravity of any consequence. By rights, we ought to be in our spacesuits now and wearing our static-grip boots. But we move about free and easy, breathing and functioning, and with our usual weight and balance. We have noticed that this is so on many small worlds. We appreciate it, but we do not understand it. How can it be?"

"You men are from World," said the big fellow. "Therefore you know of Phelan, who was also from World, and therefore you must understand Phelan's Corollary."

"Certainly we know it, or at least Crewman Bramble does," said Roadstrum. "He does much of our knowing for us."

"But I doubt that even he knows the Corollary to Phelan's Corollary," the big fellow said. "It states that 'As regards very small celestial bodies of a light-minded nature, the law of levity is allowed to supersede the law of gravity.' I call it the compassionate corollary. If I had to sit here all these ages in a spacesuit, I don't believe I'd make it."

"Get out of the way, Captain Roadstrum," Crewman Trochanter blared. "This fellow advertises country-style scuffling. Let him try great Trochanter at the wrestle. Answer me, fat-face; who is the saltiest sky-dog of them all?"

"I am," said the big man. So he and Crewman Trochanter joined in the big wrestle. Trochanter put everything on the big guy, and the big guy twisted around in it like he was made of Rega-rubber. He was always craning his head and neck out of a hold to glance through one of his telescopes or scan a bank of instruments. Trochanter threw him flat on his face, and the man twisted his head for a gawk into the telescope that looked straight down through the planet. "Just in time," he said. "I almost let a couple of them get away from me that time." Then he raised Trochanter up and slammed him shatteringly on his back, forming a spread-eagle indentation in the hard ground, seven feet long.

All the men looked kind of funny then. Trochanter was as good a country scuffer as you'll find anywhere. But spacemen can't let a tough carney keep the hop on them. One of them would have to toss him, if they had to go through the whole list.

"Who is the saltiest sky-dog of them all?" Crewman Clam-digger demanded.

"I am," said the big man. "Just a second till I scan all the scopes again and make sure everything is spinning right. All right, man, have at it."

That big fellow pinned Crewman Clamdigger so fast that it was spooky. He was good. He knew every trick, and he out-stronged them all. But still it was required that they all try him. "Who is the saltiest sky-dog of them all?" a crewman would demand. "I am," the big fellow would answer, and then the battle.

He threw them one after the other. Di Prima, Kolonymous, Boniface, Mundmark, and after each brief set-to the big fellow rushed back to peer through the spyglasses and give a quick listen through the earphones. Burpy, Fracas, Snow, Bramble, he tossed those four mighty quick. Deep John the hobo; that was an odd match. Deep John has a special hold, "the double caboose," and if the big fellow hadn't countered it with the "little-Frisco switch" he'd have gone down to defeat there. Crabgrass, Oldfellow, Lawrence, Humphrey, each one asked who

was the saltiest dog of them all, and each got his thumping answer.

The match with Margaret the houri was even odder, with preternatural elements sprung in. She turned herself into a brindled wildcat and went for his throat. Got a good piece of it too. But he got her soundly with the "cat-cracker." And yet, after she was back in her houri form, she was still licking good salty blood off her chops, his not hers, and looking more than half pleased with herself.

Eseldon, Septimus, Swinnery, Ursley, one, two, three, four, he took them. He took Crewman Threefountains. Then he tangled with Captain Puckett. This was a groaning, bulging, eye-popping contest. It lasted all through a thirty-second night, and all noticed that, when the two grappled strenuously and almost to the death, the stars in the sky dimmed and nearly went out.

"That was too close," the big fellow breathed heavily after he had left Captain Puckett unconscious on the ground. "Mind if I strap on my fourteen-direction tele-goggles for our encounter, Roadstrum, and my three pair of earphones? I just can't allow myself to be held away from it so long." He put the things on.

"Use anything you want to," Roadstrum shouted. "It will avail you nothing. Who is the saltiest sky-dog of them all?"

"I am," said the big man. And they went at it.

Roadstrum was fast as well as mighty. He was stronger than great Trochanter or great Puckett, and faster than Crabgrass or Clamdigger. He knew the "funny-man back-off," the "gandy grapple," the "mule-skinners' mangle" and the "surgical hammer."

The big guy countered with the "three-jaw cruncher," the "bandygo back-breaker" and the "badger-trap." The short days and nights flickered by, and Roadstrum was looking better and better. He was aware to every possible trick, and a particular awareness came into his mind now.

"This guy is carrying me," Roadstrum said to himself. "What does he want?" And he tumbled the big fellow with the "coon-cat crotch-hold."

"I want a favor of you, Roadstrum," the big fellow answered inside Roadstrum's head. "Promise to grant me one small favor, and I'll let you throw me." And he smashed Roadstrum one with the "Samoyed sledge."

"Anything to soothe my pride and save my reputation," Roadstrum thought back into the big fellow's head. "Let me throw you then, and make me look real good." And he sent the big fellow crashing with the "down-under dingo-trip."

"It is a bargain," the big fellow thought back into Roadstrum's head. And he did make it look good. He turned green when Roadstrum clamped him with the "Ruttigan rib-racker," he went down in pain when the great Captain applied the "double bull-whack," and he allowed himself to be pinned in the "big spider."

Roadstrum was the victor. Roadstrum was the saltiest sky-dog of them all.

"You men go enjoy yourselves for the nonce," said great Roadstrum, "and take the pleasures of the planet. I have certain soothing things to say to this glorious vanquished man. Be you away. It becomes a private thing."

The men, their plaudits sunk now to a mild roar, trekked off whooping and hollering and praising their Captain.

"And what is the small favor I am to do for you, big fellow?" Roadstrum asked graciously.

"Mind the booth for me, Roadstrum, while I go to the john. I have no relief man here."

"Why of course I will. That's a small enough favor."

"It is more important and more intricate than it appears," the big man said. "Let me explain it to you." And he explained to Roadstrum the use and importance of the telescopes and earphones and instruments and instrumental scopes.

"It is fantastic," Roadstrum said. "And it really is of such importance? I'll do it, of course. I'm a man of my word. But I had no idea that so much depended on it. The responsibility worries me a little. You will be right back, you say?"

"I will go to the john, Roadstrum, and I will come right back," the big fellow said. The big fellow left. And Roadstrum devoted himself to the business of watching the booth. It was intricate almost beyond belief; it required a degree of concentration that took a lot out of a man.

The down-telescope through the planet had a sixteen-way prismatic mirror on the other end of it (where it emerged downside planet), and integrating those sixteen sectors into a meaningful hemisphere was a mind-straining task.

The three sets of headphones that he was wearing now brought neither audio nor radio to the ears of Roadstrum, but rather three families of cosmic tones. The instruments and scopes led him to sense the various waves and fields of the universes. But none of these was the main thing. The main thing was the centrality of his mind that was tangential to every body in the all-everything-extent. What did not touch him in one of his senses or apperceptions was not.

"I am holding it," said Roadstrum. "It may be that I am the *only* one holding it at the moment. And if I let it go, if I fail, then everything fails. A few dozen or a few million bodies cannot survive alone. Each one that drops into the void of inattention will weaken the whole and topple the balance.

"It pulses, it all pulses with my own effort. The balance holds, and the lost ones are plucked out of the void each time. But it was near that time there! I must be stronger. And it becomes still nearer every time that the lost ones should careen the sound ones and draw all into the void with them.

"Why doesn't the big fellow come back!"

You see, the big fellow didn't come back right away. Quite a few of those hasty days and nights flipped past, and Roadstrum realized that a great part of an equivalent day had already gone.

Roadstrum could not leave the booth until the big man returned. Captain Puckett had offered to watch the booth for Roadstrum. Various crewmen had offered to watch it, but Roadstrum had to refuse. They were all good men, but they just weren't good enough. The responsibility was too great. Roadstrum must maintain the booth till the big man came back. If he did not, the skies would stagger and fall down, and it would all be gone.

Now rankling anxiety and envy rose up in him. He swore that he'd let the worlds fall down after all if the big fellow didn't return soon; but he knew he'd never do that. He would keep the thing going as long as he possibly could. If everything ended, it would be the end of himself also.

But he'd like to be having fun, as Puckett and the crewmen were. It was all a frolic on Kentron. This was one place where laughter was literally heard around the world. Roadstrum was amazed and amused to hear the booming laughter of Crewman Trochanter coming to him from every horizon. He'd have been more amused if he could have added his own laughter to it. There seemed also to be quite an amount of female glee mixed in with the large lilting voices of the crewmen. They were all on an antic, a revel. And Roadstrum, whose present business was to sense everything everywhere, could not help but feel it all.

"Bless the bony-headed, splayfooted bunch of them," Roadstrum said. "Bless the fine native folk who are entertaining them so gaily. And curse the big man if he do not come back quickly. I'm crushed under the weight of this job. I'm avid to be at the pleasures of this world."

But the big man did not come back right away, not for an equivalent day, not for three of them, not for an equivalent week. Roadstrum, of course, could not allow himself to sleep, hardly to blink. The responsibility was far too great. His eyes had become red-rimmed, and his ears were turned into sounding brass. His mind was in such a tangle that the far worlds reeled drunkenly, and only with the greatest effort could Roadstrum steady them again.

"The strength, the grandeur, the majesty of that big man," Roadstrum said in awe. "He has held it all going for years and centuries, so he said, and I am weary after two weeks of it? Imagine his concentration, his width and depth of mind, his spaciousness, the power and the tide of him who could master it all so easily, and I stumble awkwardly through it. Imagine the serenity of that man, the peace-in-power, the scope, the dynamism, the balance! Imagine him with a spit run through him end to end and he roasting on it! *Why don't he come back?*"

For it was a fact that the big fellow didn't come back right away. There was a lot going on there on Kentron, and Roadstrum was missing it. He was not missing it completely, of course, for whatever he missed completely simply was not. He monitored Kentron as he monitored every world everywhere. It was the personal participation in it that he missed.

For one thing, it was now carnival season on Kentron. There had seemed a sort of carnival atmosphere about the place from the beginning, but now it was real carnival. There was high roistering going on such as you do not find everywhere every day.

"Ah, I have relief," Roadstrum said suddenly. "And from World, of all places! He's a curious round-headed young boy, a Living Buddha is what he is, and he holds it all in his concentration and observation without instruments. I'm freed for the moment. I'll go find the

big fellow and see what's been taking him so long. I will—

"No, I will not! The young boy slipped beyond it. He is tricky. He really wished to exterminate it all then, after he had such a good hold on it. Had he lulled me and perhaps two or three others, he'd have done it too. We barely saved it in time. Aren't there any others now? Ah, there's a solitary creature on Goffgorina who holds it all and lets it go and holds it again; but he isn't a steady creature. Now there's a mountain-strider on Peluria who holds it all for a while. Those fellows are all quite capable, to do it without instruments, but none of them understands the importance of it. At any moment there may be a dozen sustaining persons scattered through the universes, but they cannot be trusted allwhere and allwhen. And what if there comes the moment when there are none? The responsibility is more than I can bear.

"I have to see it all in total depth all the time!" he bawled out. "I have to see every apple tree on World, every apple on every tree, every worm in every apple, every entrail-parasite of every worm, every cell of every parasite, every molecule of every cell. I have to see and understand every nucleate particle of every heat-happy sun, I must know every follicle of every trinominal plant on Ghar, every awn and glume of the eimer-wheat fields of New Dakota, every eagle of the Nine-Sky worlds, every mite in the under-feathers of every eagle, every microbe on every mite.

"I must know in which hand Crewman Clamdigger holds the coin in the game he plays with the girl at this moment. I must know the date and the head on that coin, and the flaw-stamping in the obverse lower scroll. I must know the man who made the slightly-flawed die that stamped that coin. I must know his niece. I must know the fellow she went out with three years ago once only. I must know the little kernel growing on his adrenal and beginning to give him trouble. And I must know the million rogue cells in that kernel that will be ten million tomorrow. I must know every object everywhere in many powers deeper depth.

"The spyglasses, the scopes, the instruments are but mnemonics and guides. At every moment I must see and feel the totality of it and all the ultimate detail in this great mind of mine. I stagger under the load of it.

"WHY DON'T THAT GUY COME BACK?"

The big fellow, you remember, had not come back right away, and now several equivalent months had gone by. Carnival season was over now, though there was still a lot of whooping and hollering on Kentron. Now it was the cloud-catcher season. The fleet went out, and the crewmen took the two hornets along with it (they told Roadstrum they'd be back for him bye and bye). The fleet spread its webs of spidery silver and silver nitrate, and caught and formed clouds in the nets. They dragged their catch back to Kentron with them and forced it to rain and lighten on the little world. So it was another festival-time, the Lightning-Lupercal that out-carnavaled the carnival.

Then it was hunting season on Kentron, then field-sports season, then social-sports season. All the men were having howlers, except Roadstrum.

"If I have to see every atom in the universes, why can't I see the big fellow and know what's delaying him?" Roadstrum asked himself. "Why? Because he's a Subjective, that's why. He's a Subjective, just as I unhappily also am at the moment. I wish the big fellow would come back."

The big fellow came back.

"Thanks, Roadstrum," he said, "I'll take the booth over again."

Roadstrum tore the equipment off himself and collapsed to the ground from the steep weariness of it all.

"Where were you?" he moaned. "You were gone six equivalent months."

"Roadstrum, I'd been tied to that booth for a couple hundred years. Now I'm ready to go for another long spell. But a man does need a break sometimes."

"I had no idea it was so difficult or that so much was involved in it."

"I tried to tell you, but words will not convey it. One has to be inside it to comprehend the magnitude."

"How did such a thing begin?"

"Don't you understand? It was the beginning. It's the only thing there is. But it was haphazard for so many aeons that it spooks me to think about it. There were always three or four maintaining it, but there was no one person shouldering the responsibility. 'Somewhere there must be one person strong enough to take it all over,' I said to myself in a direful moment, but the strongest person I could think of was myself. I've been doing it ever since. A

few centuries ago Berkeley gave it a philosophical basis, but could I get him to shoulder the thing itself? Yes, for a year or so. And then the flannel-mouthed Irishman talked his way out of it and I had it again. Well, it's a job."

"Is it really so important in every detail?"

"Yes. You are a detail, Roadstrum. If I put you out of my mind for a moment, then you are not. By my attention I hold it all in being. Nothing exists unless it is perceived. If perception fails for a moment, then that thing fails forever."

"Suppose you neglected but one aspect of a faraway thing for but one moment?"

"Sometimes I do. On several of the worlds there are beautiful roses that have no odor. It is because I forgot to smell them for one brief instant. There are several curious bobtailed little animals in various systems. It is because, for an instant, I forgot to think of the ends of their tails. Here you will find a blind or deaf or halt creature; it is because I did not give them my full attention in one moment."

"Well, you are certainly a sturdy man to stand up under it."

"Yes, but I hate to be misjudged. They say that I bear it all on my shoulders, as though I were a stud or a balk. It is not my great shoulders, it is the amazing head on my great shoulders that maintains it all."

The crewmen were ready to go. They heard of a world that made all others seem trivial. Now that Roadstrum was freed from watching the booth, they said to come along, Captain, and let's be with it.

So they readied the hornets.

"I never did know your name, big fellow," Roadstrum said in parting.

"Atlas."

*What thing they were and what an architecture yet,  
What song they sang is not beyond conjecture yet.*

*Where heroes' bones for ages strewed the shore about!  
A murdering song that men can say no more about!*

*They came in cresting waves and boldly tried for it,  
And broke and blanched and balked and burned and died for it.*

*A tune that must ensorcel them and rot them all!  
The missing note was really what had got them all.*

Ibid

They came to Sireneca. "There is something the matter with the spelling of that," Roadstrum said. "It doesn't look right." This was the world of the Siren-Zo, the Siren-Animal, which is either a creature or a musical mountain or a manifestation or a group of very peculiar folks.

"I really wasn't ready for another truculent world," Roadstrum said. "We've had it so pleasant at all our stops since leaving Kentron Planet."

They had been to Nine Worlds; they had taken over Nine Worlds. They had been involved in the work and recreation for which they were best fitted, and it had really been quite a pleasant interlude.

There had been leagues and anti-leagues on Nine Worlds, there had been conspiracy and war and revolution, there had been crude butchery, and there had been really fine weaponry. The twenty-plus men from the hornets made themselves at home in the situation. They were wonderful fighting men, the least competent of them able to command armies. They took command of troops on opposite sides of the broil (at one time there were five different sides to the battles), and they connived and gained.

Roadstrum himself was probably the finest fighting man in the universe, and now he discovered that he was also a master diplomat. At the time when they had had to make new tongues for themselves (after that little embarrassment on Lamos of the Giants), Roadstrum had made a forked tongue for himself. He was now as polished and pleasant a liar as you

would ever want to meet, and he took all those folks in every conference.

The trouble on Nine Worlds was that things had been a little too loose. Now the hornet men came out on top, and they tightened things up a little. They brought in nine world-managers from Guild, and they laid down rules to be followed. For now Roadstrum was absolute owner of Nine Worlds.

"I know that none of you men wish to be burdened with property," he said, "or I'd give you a world each, as long as they lasted. But since none of you have any such desire—"

"I have," said Crewman Snow. "I want a world."

They hadn't known before that Snow was a grasping greedy man. It was hard to understand how a hornet crewman (they were a free and easy lot) could want to be burdened with ownership of a world and the income of billions of billions of Chancels every quarter, but there is someone like that in every crowd.

Roadstrum gave Crewman Snow title to one of the worlds with very bad grace. He sent the titles to the other eight worlds by dispatch to the men's room attendant on Roulettenwelt, reducing his debt somewhat.

So the Nine Worlds affair had been pleasant easy business, and now they had come to another tough world. They were already hooked on Sireneca, and they hadn't intended to be. They had joked about it coming in, but they had known that it had its hook in them already, that they would have to kill it or be killed by it.

"Will you pour hot wax in our ears as was done the first time, Captain Roadstrum?" Crewman Clamdigger jibed. "And tie yourself to the mast? But we don't have a mast."

"I will pour hot lead into your throats to still your chatter," Roadstrum said. "We are fools to be into this thing but we cannot, back off. It isn't as good a tune as that. When we find the lost note and fit it in we will probably discover that it is a very ordinary tune."

"We haven't heard it yet," Crewman Threefountains said.

"In our modern times we always hear a thing before we have heard it," Roadstrum maintained. "Our instruments have already recorded it and broken it down. Crewman Bramble reads the score and is entranced by it, up to a point. He is the most intelligent of us and he enjoys music in the most intelligent way, reading the score without the noise to distract. The others of us, for our insufficiency, are doomed to listen vulgarly."

"But we all know that there is something wrong with that tune, even before we come to it. Our instruments are experiencing frustration, and so are we. 'Something missing, something missing,' they transmit. 'Imperative that the missing element be found. Not very good tune anyhow.' Yes, there's the final high note missing in the tune, and we must find it or we will never sleep again. Many brave men have given their lives for this and failed. I say that we will not fail! We will force the missing note from the thing. And then we will kill it so it will no more be a hazard to farers."

Sireneca was mostly ocean, mean ocean with steely choppy waves following a strange harmonic. They did not have free flow, nor real crest, nor tide. Something was missing from the ocean waves. Their tune was the tune of the planet, and it was an incomplete tune.

There was but one small continent or island on Sireneca, and in the middle of it was the animal, or the mountain, or the folk. The hornets had set down on the flanks of this thing, and the crewmen made ready to solve it.

"Let us tackle this as a strategic problem," said great Captain Puckett. "You had better let me handle this, Roadstrum. A strategic man you are not. Formulate the problem, Crewman Bramble."

"The problem is to force the missing note from the creature or creatures so that our apprehensions and frustrations may be quieted and our sanity restored. The ancillary of the problem is that we do this without ourselves perishing, as all other farers here have perished."

"And what is the nature of the opponent, Crewman Bramble?"

"That we do not know, Captain Puckett, nor whether it is a single or plural thing. In earliest mythology it was referred to as the Siren-Zo or the Siren-Animal, as being one. But in appearance it is many, as we now see it, in the form of various well-bodied, golden-haired, singing women on the numerous outcroppings of the musical mountain. In what manner they kill all who try to come up to reach them is not known. Our only procedure seems to be that true one—trial and error. I suggest that the most useless man of us begin the climb now, and we will see how he dies."

"Crewman Nonvalevole, start climbing," Captain Puckett ordered. "Make for the nearest of



the goldie-blondes there.”

“All right,” said Crewman Nonvalevole, and he began to climb the musical mountain up to the nearest siren. There was an odd thing about his climbing. Often the rocks of the mountain shivered under his feet as if to throw him down.

“The mountain itself is the creature,” said Captain Roadstrum. “The scree and the boulders are part of its hide, and it shivers its hide like a World horse. The whole thing is alive. The blonde maidens are but tentacles of the thing.”

“May I tangle with such a tentacle!” said Crewman Crabgrass.

“We must find the mortal center of the creature and attack it there,” Roadstrum continued. “We will not kill it by scratching its hide. But when we do find its mortal center and kill it there, then, I believe, in its moment of death agony, we will hear the missing note. That is my conjecture.”

“Oh be quiet, great Captain Roadstrum,” all the men said. “A conjecture man you are not.”

Crewman Nonvalevole had now climbed nearly to the nearest blonde siren. She rolled limpid blue eyes at him and sang in wonderful brass. It was a green-country foot-shuffling tune with a touch of boogie and a touch of ballad, none of your fancy things. It was the sort of tune that faring men themselves sing, but incomparably better, and with a rich beat and swing. The hornet instruments had been wrong to call it “Not very good tune anyhow,” for it was good. It rose to the high stunning happy pitch—and then nothing. The climax note was missing and it drove them all crazy.

And then it began once more. Again and again it rose, and left the gaping silence at its apex. Men would perish of hunger and thirst yearning for that missing note. It had to be found.

Crewman Nonvalevole was up to the shimmering blonde now. Singingly she smiled at him and patted her golden knees. The crewman sat on her blonde lap and enfolded her in passionate arms.

There was lightning without thunder. The blonde brushed ashes and cinders out of her lap, ashes and cinders that were all the mortal remains of Crewman Nonvalevole.

“That was sudden and consuming,” said Captain Puckett. “Did you get a reading on it, Crewman Bramble?”

“Twelve thousand amps, nine million volts, a little over one million cycles. A pretty good jolt. She never missed a note either, except the missing note itself. And I am sure that I heard a hint of that too, right at the frying moment. It didn’t sound, but it was near to becoming a sound.”

“The almost-sound was from Crewman Nonvalevole, not from Siren-sis,” said Captain Roadstrum. “In his moment he did come near to voicing the note. I believe that I am on the right course. I have this intuition that we must go for the interior vitals. The outer hide of the thing is dangerous.”

“Be quiet, Captain Roadstrum,” said Captain Puckett. “An intuitive man you are not. It’s a pretty good electric chair they have though.”

“It isn’t new; it’s been done before,” Crewman Crabgrass cut in. “They have them on Womboggle World, electric chairs in the form of beautiful women so the condemned can die happy.”

“Who is the next most worthless man?” Captain Puckett asked. “That would be Crewman Stumble, I believe.”

“I’ll not go up!” swore Crewman Stumble. “I am not worthless to me. Send a dummy man up.”

“That’s what you are,” said the relentless Captain Puckett. “You will go up, and you will trail a ground wire behind you like a tail. We will see if this one crisps you as thoroughly as that one fried Crewman Nonvalevole. We will get several of these fryings and we may be able to establish a pattern as to the way they work.”

“Well, all right, but I don’t like it,” Crewman Stumble grumbled. Crewman Bramble attached a ground wire to Stumble like a tail, and Stumble began to climb the mountain toward the swishing blonde on a low left ledge. She ground out the ballad, fluting brass and a touch of fiddle music, in her buxom voice. Crewman Stumble became livelier the nearer he came to her, and she sang him up to her with an ever heftier voice, all the foot-stomping ascending notes, except the final one. The top of the tune was still missing.

Crewman Stumble finished his up-jaunt with a wild surge to the blonde’s outstretched arms, leaped aboard her spacious frame, and locked around her with arms and legs. She

intruded a laughing note into the ballad, but not the note itself. Then she gave him a smooch that was one of the great things.

Once more there was lightning without thunder. Then the blonde was brushing the ashes and embers of Crewman Stumble off her breast. And the damnable song rose and fell again and again, and the top of it was always missing.

"Did you get a reading that time, Crewman Bramble?" Captain Puckett asked.

"Yes. I believe it is the beginning of success," Crewman Bramble stated. "The ground wire made a difference. It vaporized, of course, and the reaction killed three other crewman near this end of it, but we do show progress. We begin to establish a pattern. It was only eleven thousand and fifty amps that time, eight and a quarter million volts, and the frequency remained the same. This time we'll use a heavier ground wire ... hell, we'll use two of them!"

"Who is the next most useless man?" Captain Puckett asked, looking around.

"Enough!" Captain Roadstrum announced ponderously. "I am taking command once more."

"But, Roadstrum, we are proceeding according to scientific testing methods," Puckett protested. "Please don't interfere. A scientific man you are not."

"An excess of science will leave none of us alive, Puckett. Scouting patrol, see how we may find entrance to the thing itself! We itch in its hide, and it scratches us to kill. But it cannot scratch us if we are inside it. I have old folk memory of ascending the thing inside. We will find the passage."

The scouts scouted. They went on hornet instruments when bankrupt of other ideas. The instruments told them that the mountain-animal was indeed hollow, or at least had an open anal-oral passage, and that the entrance could be found, very deep and under water. The instruments indicated just where that passage was, but shuddered when asked whether there were dangers involved.

"As the finest diver and the finest all-man, I will go first," Captain Roadstrum announced. "Do you all follow me like close tails. If we drown and die, remember that one death is as good as another."

"No it is not," said Crewman Mundmark. "I'd rather die crisped by one of those blondies than drown in black water."

Captain Roadstrum dived a great dive down into the black water, in under the shelf of the continent that was also the mountain and the creature; and all the men followed him. He dove till it seemed that his lungs would burst. They did burst a little, bye and bye, and this gave him some relief. It also left a dark red trail that the men could follow.

Then they all broke surface in a black cavity very deep under the thing. The only light was a garish dark red one far above them.

"It goes five hundred meters up and is a tricky climb," said Captain Puckett.

"We are tricky men; we can climb it," said Captain Roadstrum. "Do you see it now, men, do you see the form of the creature? It is a big rambling spider-form inside here, and the mountain is a living shell it has built for itself, for it's a mixed creature. The tune has a deeper tone inside here, and one can make out the words, but what do they mean. 'Da luan, da mort,' over and over again. 'Da luan, da mort,' what does that mean, over and over again, Crewman Bramble?"

"It's the treadmill song out of an Irish cycle," said Bramble. "'Monday and Tuesday and Monday and Tuesday and Monday and Tuesday,' so the poor slaves had to sing at their labor for the puca. And finally a great savior came and broke the charm. 'And Wednesday too,' he said, and then it was all over with."

"Roadstrum is the great savior who breaks the charm," Roadstrum announced. "I will set a Wednesday-term to the monster. But there are other elements in this. Is not the climbing up of the giant spider and the slaying of it an Arabian-cycle thing? And did not Hans Schultz, in the green-island cycle, have a dream of the same thing? Upward, men; we are onto a great kill!"

Hawyers, cables a meter thick they climbed—and these were but the fine silks of the giant spider. The hairs on its toes were even thicker, and the men blasted them, beginning the attack. A note of alarm crept into the mountainous singing now. The creature knew that it was invaded but did not know how or by what. The creature sent tremors through its webs that threatened to dash the men down to their deaths.

"We must go inside the creature and kill it interiorly," Roadstrum announced when they had ascended a hundred meters. So they all entered the vulgar cavity of the thing and continued to climb upward.

There was still light, more so than before. It was more garish, redder, more threatening than it had been. That first light had been but the reflection of this. The mountainous interior spider had nine outside eyes and one great glowing interior eye by which he liked to contemplate himself. This was the spookiest light ever seen; and was the spookiest place, but one, in all the universes.

"The big red interior eye like a beacon is the mortal center of the creature," Roadstrum announced. "We will kill it there and it will die. And we will get our missing note then, or we will die too, from deprivation. It goes into a frenzy now as we close in on it. Who is the scareder, we or it?"

"We are, we are," the men cried. "We're the scarest men ever."

The singing mountain had become hysterical with fright of the small things climbing up its maw. The song was really a racy one now, a lot of good fever in it, a black-blood beat that was solid. It rose and moaned, and only the top of it was missing. But it had outlined itself now, and the final note, when it came, would be worth it all.

It was now seen that the entire mountain-creature was one single instrument, and the whole planet was its sounding box. The blondie-orifices were but small reeds of this amazing organ, the giant web-threads were quivering strings.

Now the music-mountain was frantic, and so were the men. "Somebody dies pretty quick now," gasped Crewman Cutshark, "either we or he, and I don't much care which so long as it is swift."

"Mind those quivering stalks there, Cutshark," Roadstrum warned. "I believe that they emit a very strong digestive juice."

"Touch one, Crewman Cutshark," Captain Puckett ordered. "Observe the data, Crewman Bramble."

Crewman Cutshark touched one of the stalks, and he dissolved. The flesh was whisked away from him like vapor. He was only rather dirty white bones, and then the bones also dissolved.

"What did you get, Crewman Bramble?" Captain Puckett asked.

"Eleven million dissolution units at a base of—"

"Leave off the science stuff or I'll clamp you all in irons," Roadstrum warned. "Upward, men, to the big kill. It's but fifty meters above us, and death licking at us every spot of the way. Hey, listen to the way it's beginning to scream now! That really jazes up the tune."

"That's me screaming, Captain Roadstrum, and I don't figure on stopping for quite a while," Crewman Threefountains screamed.

Ah, the baleful red-glowing inner eye of the monster, which was also its soul and its mortal center. It blazed with red and black fire, and crackled and stunk. The tune began a new ascension, many times more powerful than it had been before, hysterical with horror, giddy and gibbering, hate-hopping, and yet quite the best thing of its sort ever done. All it needed was the top of the tune, and that moment drew very near. The whole mountain was lashing out frantically, flinging thousand-ton boulders out of its quivering hide, moaning and bursting asunder.

"Now, men, now!" great Roadstrum cried, and he dove upward into the giant living eye. And all dove into it, rending it, killing the thing.

The note. The missing note sounded. It was worth it. It was fulfillment. It was water after deserts. It was the top of the tune. They all heard it. And nobody would ever hear it again.

It sounded the note in its last agony. Then the whole mountain died.

Roadstrum kicked the mountain open and they all went outside. The mountain was smaller than it had been, and it shrunk down still smaller as though the air were being let out of it.

The tune was gone and forever. Its missing note would no more be a hazard to that sector of space. All the crewmen felt deep satisfaction. They had heard the dying note of the Siren-Zo and their thirst was quenched. The blondie appendages had become broken dolls.

All loaded into the hornets for further adventures. It was early Wednesday morning.

## CHAPTER FIVE

*On Polyphem, a sneaking, snaking mood they found,  
And something odd about the tasty food they found.*

*They gazed to see the passive sheep and lambs about,  
Nor guessed themselves to be the woolly rams about.*

*The leader, he a sullen stormy blokey there,  
Defiled the bord and put them in the pokey there.*

*And one became so gross they couldn't carry him,  
And one so queer and cold they had to bury him.*

*But some got out alive from it, and well they did,  
And lived for worse, but none knows how the hell they did.*

Ibid

THE KID HONDSTARFER, back on Lamos that was Valhalla, had told them that one of the hornets would break down after a little while. He said that he had made a lot of mistakes on one of them. But they had worked perfectly since that time, and the Captains and crewmen had forgotten that advice.

Now the hornet of Puckett broke down. Or it broke, and it had to come down somewhere or perish into pieces. Puckett told Roadstrum to go on and leave him. Puckett had a way of putting it on pretty thick, sort of a wheedling way, sort of a “but of course one space captain would never leave another in distress” way of presenting such things. Roadstrum felt a strange body twinge which he mistook for the call of duty. He said he would never leave a mate in distress.

“I believe a little creative mutiny is called for here,” Crewmen Trochanter and Crabgrass and Clamdigger told Captain Roadstrum. “We are a little tired of caring for the boys in Boat B, and we’re not too happy about yourself.”

Roadstrum had a way of putting it on pretty thick himself.

“Be there man among you who doubts my demesne or destiny, then I have fared in vain,” he said. “I bare my throat to the treacherous steel—”

“All right, all right,” the three tough crewmen capitulated. “We’re with you, all the way and in everything. Only spare us the ‘act.’”

“It’s Polyphemia or nothing,” Roadstrum called to Puckett over the communicator. “There’s not another world we could possibly reach.”

“You said the same thing about Lamos of the Giants,” Puckett protested. “Roadstrum, there’s *got* to be another world.”

“Oh, that wasn’t really so bad, Puckett. Thinking back on it, it was sort of fun with the giants. There really isn’t another world we can reach if you’re coming apart. Polyphemia is better than nothing.”

(“False tongue,” voiced the communicator.)

“Oh all right, Roadstrum, we’ll go down then.”

But the communicator was right. Roadstrum did speak with false tongue unwittingly. Polyphemia was incomparably worse than nothing.

But it looked wonderful enough coming into it. Great green grass! But it did look wonderful! It was a pastoral world, said the manual. The Polyphemians were simple shepherds. They raised sheep and goats, made a little cheese and whey, drank sweet milk, ate fine lamb and kid, perhaps wove a little wool, the manual said, lived in fleece or hair tents, and supposedly played pastoral airs on wooden flutes.

"It cloys, it cloys," said Crewman Clamdigger. "Let's think a little more about that mutiny, men."

"Ah well, maybe there'll be shepherdesses," Roadstrum told them.

"Combing wool and churning butter, not for us," said Crewman Trochanter.

They landed badly. The facilities on Polyphemia were the worst in the universe. They felt eyes watching them, wolfish eyes, not sheep eyes. But the only one who shuffled up to meet them was a lank, dour shepherd. They supposed he was a shepherd, but he wasn't combing wool.

"A happy day to you," Captain Roadstrum boomed. "I suppose it isn't every day that fine, cheerful, interesting strangers come to visit you."

"We hate strangers," said the Polyphemian. "And we hate spacecraft. We hate just about everything."

He shriveled them with a look, and he spat green.

"But we are in dire distress. One of our crafts is crippled. We will need time to repair it, and perhaps we will need your help," said Roadstrum.

"We are tone-deaf to the call of help," said the sour shepherd. "We are deaf to almost everything. There is only one sound we hear a little. We call it the green whisper."

Roadstrum gave it to him: the soft sound of an educated thumb ruffled over the edges of high-denomination bills. The shepherd heard it. It is a dangerous double-bladed sound. It has got a lot of people in trouble. But the hornet-men were confident of their ability to handle anything.

The shepherd gave a grunt that was perhaps assent. He gaped his face in what might have been a grin. And he was suddenly joined by quite a number of his fellows.

"Just what is it you want, strangers?" asked one of the new shepherds, who seemed to rank a little higher than the first one.

"Why, if not hospitality, at least a hospice," said Roadstrum. "We are space-weary. We would rest. We would eat and drink. And then we would examine the facilities here."

"There is only Drovers' Cottage," said the leading shepherd. "You can rest there now. You can eat with us in the hall this evening. And there are no facilities on Polyphemia."

"How is the food here?" asked Crewman Trochanter.

"Monotonous, mostly," said the shepherd. "There is one particular food that sets us up, and we have not had it in months. We get pretty tired of plain mutton."

Well, the shepherds guided the crewmen to Drovers' Cottage through rich meadows and pastures populated with herds of sheep.

Sheep? Are you sure they are sheep?

The lodgings were bad. Drovers' Cottage was not a palace. But heat was not needed, and there were tallow candles provided for when they should be needed. They were fed a little, though the sun was still high in the sky. It may have been mutton, but most curious tasting mutton. Then porridge, perhaps, that may have been weevily. They even were served perry from the runt fruit of the land, and became one-tenth happy on it.

But the sheep worried Roadstrum, and he looked out at them and puzzled about them.

"I'm not a farm boy, but there's something the matter with those sheep," he maintained.

"It is my considered opinion that they're woolly enough and dirty enough to be sheep," said Captain Puckett. "Is some third thing required? Why, Roadstrum, you must admit that they're sheepish enough to be sheep. Therefore they are sheep."

"Crewman Bramble, are they sheep?" Captain Roadstrum asked.

"The only thing about sheep I ever studied was sheep's liver flukes parasites, or it may have been sheep's flukes liver parasites. Let me see their parasites and I'll tell you quickly enough whether they're sheep. But I never studied sheep as such, and I doubt if anyone else did. There was no such course at Cram College."

"They walk on two legs when they're not down eating," Roadstrum said. "Is that right? Do you think it right they should walk about on two legs, Crewman Clamdigger?"

"I never studied sheep either, Captain. I say, according to the principle of subsidiarity, and no local law countervailing, let them walk on two legs if they want to. Is it our business how

the sheep of Polyphemia walk?"

"Well, there is something peculiar about them as sheep," Roadstrum held out stubbornly, "and sooner or later I'll think what it is. I believe I'll just go out and have a talk with those fellows."

Many of the sheep were still eating in the meadow, and they ate awkwardly, as though it were a learned thing for them to eat that way. And others of the sheep were gathered in a low tavern. Roadstrum went into this with some misgivings. He had not heard of sheep as congregating in taverns. "And yet I suppose that they should be classified as social animals," he said; "why should they not meet in taverns?"

It was a shabby sort of tavern they had there. The bar was of rough unfinished wood that had never known polish, the stools and benches were badly made and wobbly, very poor things. "They look as though they had been made by sheep," said Roadstrum, "and I suppose they were."

Roadstrum hardly knew how to begin. He had never talked with sheep before, nor associated with them at all.

"Are you a sheep?" he asked one of them finally.

"Why, yes, I'm a sheep. What else would I be?"

"You look almost as if you were a very shaggy man."

"Ah well, I wouldn't say that. I suppose I'm a sheep. I have always been a sheep."

"Well then, what would you say is the difference between a sheep and a man?"

"A man will eat a sheep. But did you ever hear of a sheep eating a man?"

"Don't believe I ever did," said Captain Roadstrum.

There was something sorrowful about the sheep. They ate and drank dully from a vat that contained foul vegetables, leeks and ramps and strong gross turnips, and rank things that were very earthy but not of old Earth. They were fat, whether men or sheep, and they smelled like sheep.

But there was no real merriment, as there should be in a tavern. They drank a potion that seemed to be potato beer. Roadstrum took a bowl of it out of curiosity. It was mildly alcoholic, and it should have enlivened the tavern.

"Do you ever have music?" Roadstrum asked. "Anything to liven up the place?"

"We sing a little sometimes," said the sheep he had been talking to. "We do not sing well."

"Let's try it," cried Roadstrum. "Come on, fellows; let me hear one of your rousing songs! I am a stranger with a great curiosity about you. Some of you start with a few bars, and I will lend my own wonderful voice to the melody. Sing, sing!"

"Well, all right," some of the bolder sheep said.

They sang flatly, but they sang:

*"The docker-man a-drawing near,*

*"he don't appear at all appall us.*

*"He whets a knife and sheds a tear.*

*"We haven't any tails at all us."*

"We haven't any tails at all us," Roadstrum gave them the last line back in hearty chorus. It wasn't a bad little tune, but the words gave Roadstrum a turn.

"Why, you fellows haven't tails at all, have you? Not even docked stubs. I thought sheep always had tails unless they were chopped off."

"Not on Polyphemia," said the sheep Roadstrum had been talking to. "That must be some other kind of sheep somewhere else."

"Come on, lads; give us another verse," Roadstrum cried encouragingly.

"All right," said the sheep, "if we must." They sang flatly once more.

*"For greeny grass to graze and grout*

*"we couldn't eat the stuff or store it.*

*"They took our gimpy gullet out*

*"and gave us seven stomachs for it."*

"And gave us seven stomachs for it," Roadstrum bawled out in melodic response. "Ah, I believe there is a bit of folklore or ovine-lore hidden in that stanza," he said shrewdly. "You

were not naturally ruminants? And you have been made into such? This becomes one of the most curious things I ever ran into. I suspect that you are not sheep at all."

"We have to be sheep," the sheep said. "Who else would have us?"

"Well, no need to be sheepish sheep," Roadstrum encouraged. "Let us have one more stanza and be glad of our respective states. You think it is all possum and red-eyed gravy being a man? Sing, hearties, sing."

And flatly they sang once more:

*"Ah Jennie was a gambol lamb,*

*"a lamb no more is gambol Jennie.*

*"Subducted by a Sweedish ram!*

*"We all got yen for yeaning Yennie."*

"*We all got yen for yeaning Yennie,*" Roadstrum roared out in raucous chorus. "Why, fellows, you have wonderful songs and you are wonderful singers! No? You don't think so? I guess you're right. In no other company in the universe would I be the finest singer present."

A man came in. A man and not a sheep. A villainous looking man. He passed out little slips of parchment to some of the sheep, and then he left again.

And the sheep seemed even more depressed than they had been.

"Your call?" the sheep-bartender asked Roadstrum's friend.

"Yes. For tomorrow," the sheep said sadly.

"We all have to go. That's what we're here for."

"I know. But I hate to leave Agnes and the children."

The sheep was very fat and very sorrowful. Roadstrum was very interested in the sheep as being his friend, and was especially curious about the parchments.

"What is it?" he asked the sheep. "What does your slip say?"

"It says my name," said the sheep, "and it says tomorrow."

Respecting the sheep's reserve, Roadstrum did not pursue the matter, but he felt that something was very wrong.

Oh well, the sheep got a little happier as the afternoon progressed. They sang some more, and they did a little better when they weren't urged to it too strongly.

They passed the cup that impels, and their fat faces began to glow. They even told stories. There is a whimsy to sheep stories that is like nothing else; humble and bashful, and yet with a real cud of humor. And shaggy sheep stories are a special form. But do sheep, in fact, have stories and humor and song?

Roadstrum had always believed that he had troubles enough of his own. He seldom borrowed trouble, and never at usurious terms. He knew it as a solid thing that sheep do not gather in taverns and drink beer, not even potato beer; that they do not sing, not even badly; that they do not tell stories. But a stranger can easily make trouble for himself on a strange world by challenging local customs.

"But I am the great Roadstrum," he said, suddenly and loudly. "I am a great one for winning justice for the lowly, and I do not scare easily. I threw the great Atlas at the wrestle, and who else can say as much? I suffer from the heroic sickness every third day about nightfall, and I am not sure whether this is the third day or not. I say you are men and not sheep. I say: Arise, and be men indeed!"

"It has been tried before," said Roadstrum's friend the sheep, "and it didn't work."

"You have tried a revolt, and it failed?"

"No, no, another man tried to incite us to revolt, and failed."

"Tell me about it, sheep."

"Another man, another traveler talked to us as you have done. 'Early in the morning you must revolt,' he said. 'You must refuse to go where they herd you; you must refuse to be butchered. You must take up stones and clubs in your hands, and beat down the men who would take you to slaughter.' That's what the man told us."

"And that is what I tell you," said Roadstrum.

"Ah well, it was the shortest revolt on record," the sheep said. "In the morning, some of us did take up sticks and stones in our hands. And then the whistle blew as it does every morning. Those who had received their notices for that day threw away their sticks and stones and broke rank and went, jostling each other, to their slaughter. You don't think we'd want them to have to blow that whistle at us the second time, do you? And who ever heard of

sheep picking up stones and bones and going to battle. It just isn't in our nature to revolt."

There was the gonging of a great bell that signaled it was time for the animals to go to their cotes. It was just sundown, and the sheep should be snug in the fold by dark. They all said good night, and shuffled out very sheep-like. And so it was sundown, and it was time for Roadstrum and the other hornet men to go dine with the high Polyphemians in their hall.

"Did you find out anything about those fellows, Roadstrum?" Captain Puckett asked him as he joined the others.

"Puckett, they do not look like sheep, and they do not act enough like men. There is something the matter with the whole business."

"I would not worry about it," said Puckett. "Remember the hornet-men's code: Never incite a local populace unless there is something in it for you."

Well, they were set down at quite a big table with all the big Polyphemians, and the Cacique of Polyphemia was at the head of the table.

"Are you not afraid to come unarmed into our hall, little men?" the big Cacique asked. "Do you trust our hospitality?"

"We trust all hospitality everywhere," said steady Roadstrum. "We have been on a hundred worlds, and nowhere has the bord been defiled. We trust the hospitality of all men when we break bread with them. We have eaten giants' bread on Lamos and cotton candy on Kentron World, and we have not met treachery. Treachery, where it comes, does not touch the silent oath of the bord. This is respected on all worlds."

"Eat hearty, eat hearty!" said the Cacique. "How do you like our food?"

"The double oath of the bord does not require that we lie," growled Crewman Trochanter. "It is insipid. You must know that yourselves."

"It is not our best food, but it is the best we have to offer at present. For ourselves more than for you we regret this; nobody loves fine food so much as do we. We expect a finer food shortly, but for topological reasons you will not be able to partake of it. But we will bless you in that hour when again we eat our fine food,"

"I have a complaint, a very serious complaint," said just Roadstrum.

"Strangers may not lodge complaints till they have been in residence here for ninety days," the Cacique said, "and no stranger has ever remained with us that long."

"My complaint won't hold for ninety days. I accuse you people of eating men."

"You could not have heard of—but no, their arrival was not logged, any more than yours was. If you are given another life, good Roadstrum, you should learn to post your arrivals more carefully, let people know where you are. But that is another matter. What is it you are speaking of? Get to the point."

"I will. You are slaughtering some of them in that building now."

"Oh, you mean the sheep? For a moment I thought that you meant—"

"They are men, and you know it."

"I know it, and you know it. But the sheep don't know it, and the documentation does not know it. We are logged as a pastoral planet, given over almost entirely to the raising of sheep. Will you argue with the Gazeteer itself? I can show you the pedigrees of all these creatures, and they are sheep pedigrees. They are good eating, but there is better. Do you know what it is?"

"I do not. But this I will not eat," said mighty Roadstrum, and he overturned the great bowl of spicy goulash. "Sheep this is not."

"You could have waited till we had finished," grumbled Crewman Clamdigger. "The stuff is good. And you said yourself that the sheep did not act quite like men."

"We are insulted," said the Cacique. "You have defiled the bord. On all worlds one eats what one is given, and one praises it."

"All praise to this flesh!" howled Roadstrum. "Flesh of our own flesh! We eat not our own kindred! On your feet, men! It's a rumble! Awk!"

And not a single brave man came to his feet. They were manacled in their chairs where they sat. Trapped chairs! They had fallen into the most childish trap of them all. They shook the hall with their fury, but their bonds were strong and so was the hall. And all the great Polyphemians were laughing.

"We told you that there was a finer food," the Cacique of Polyphemia chortled, "and that there were reasons why you could not partake of it. But we will partake, and we will begin to do so tomorrow. We have it so seldom. Tame servile sheep is tame food indeed. You were



right to call it insipid, but it is the best we have for our daily fare. But there is a better, Roadstrum, a better."

"What, you toothy androphage, what could be more vile, or better in your view?" the furious enchained Roadstrum demanded.

"Yourselves, woolly Roadstrum, rampant ram! It is everything that tame sheep is not. It is the finest of fine foods for our own fine selves. We will have to arrange to have it oftener. Ah, rage, Roadstrum, and all your fine men! Rage and grow fat in your rage. In our own way we love you, and we'll waste not a gout of you."

So Roadstrum and Puckett and all their furious men from the hornet crews were dragged, amid sky-splitting noise by all concerned, into a dungeon to be fatted for the kill.

Margaret, of course, was not with them. She had made her own arrangements with the high Polyphemians. There were the two great Captains, Deep John the Vagabond, and either seventeen or eighteen crewmen. There is a point of issue here.

Twenty of them had been dragged in, counted, and certified. But a little while later there were twenty-one of them. The big Polyphemians told the counter that he had made a mistake, and that he would go in the pot for it. The counter maintained that he had not made a mistake, that he had counted correctly, and there had been only twenty. The counter was correct in this, but he went into the pot nevertheless.

How the twenty-first man happened to be there, why he was not there at first and where he came from, and how he differed from the rest of them are things of great moment.

A Polyphemian pokey is much like a pokey anywhere. Deep John asserted that this was so, and he had been in more pokies than all of them together. And yet there was something special about this one, and it had to do with their special purpose of being there. They were fed lavishly. And they were mocked. "Rage, and grow fat in your rage," the Cacique had told them. Well, they did rage, and they ate, and they raged again. There was little else to do.

It was rank fare, but there was an abundance of it. Crewman Starkhead would not eat at all. Crewman Burpy ate to excess. The rest of them attempted to practice moderation, but they were hooked into eating more and more. With the rank leeks and ramps were also habit-forming mushrooms of an intoxicating sort, compelling them to eat more and yet more, and to rage and rave. Their moderation became more and more immoderate, and they came somewhat to like the low food. Worried and restricted men will eat to ease their worry, and they grew fat in spite of themselves. Except Crewman Starkhead.

Margaret the houri visited them, but not often. She had been consorting with the high Polyphemians, and Roadstrum accused her of being faithless.

"But of course I am faithless, great Roadstrum," she said. "It is our nature to be."

"Haven't you any loyalty at all," he asked in his sorrowful voice, putting on the act a little.

"I don't think so. We weren't constituted with any," she said.

"But I am sure you would work for us against the Polyphemians."

"Work against those fellows and get put in the pot? Not me. And they're not bad at all. They're so blamed mean that it's fun. There come times when we like our fellows real mean," she said.

"We will remember that when we are out again and you with us," threatened Crewman Trochanter. "Mean, Margaret, real mean. And you won't like it."

"Oh, but you're not going to get out. You're in it for good, and they're going to eat you up every one."

But Roadstrum used his special wheedle on her then, talking to her privately in a low voice through the grille. What words he used we do not know; but remembering that he now had a forked tongue, and that he had become something of a diplomat on Nine-worlds, we know that he found apt words.

Margaret did agree to work for them and spy for them. She still wanted to go to Earth with them. She had heard that the men there were willing.

It was on the following morning, their second day on Polyphemia, that Di Prima was taken. He had always been the fattest of them. He went with a joke on his lips about his name and he being the first of them taken, but in spirit he was uneasy. And the other men all raged at the idea of one of their companions being taken and being roasted and stewed and then eaten. They roared and ranted, and the Polyphemians mocked them to still greater fury. And they ate in their wrath and put on a sheath of hasty angry fat.

Late that night one of the Polyphemians came to them and told them that Di Prima hadn't

been very good.

"Fat enough, but not rampant enough," he said. "But we expect much more of all of you. Rampant rams! Rage and grow! Oh you will be prime stuff!"

And they were all driven almost insane by the angry mushrooms in their broth. But Margaret came to them a little later and told them that the mocking Polyphemian had lied.

"Yes he was good! I always liked Crewman Di Prima, but I never liked him so much as at the banquet. He was the best man ever. Really!"

"You ate? You ate part of him?" Captain Roadstrum asked, and he was aghast.

"What else would I eat? He was the banquet. And he was good good good!"

Thereafter they all thought of her a little differently, now that she had feasted with the high Polyphemians and had eaten one of them. And she also thought of them in a different way and looked at them with odd anticipation.

Crewmen Fracas, Snow, Bramble, and Crabgrass went to be eaten, one each day. Bangtree went. Oldfellow and Lawrence went. Each went a little less gallantly than had his predecessor, and now the jokes on their lips were of a strained quality. They were still the brave crewmen, but it does rag you this being taken out and eaten one at a time.

"We can't go on like this," Roadstrum moaned. "We have to play our ace to survive. Why, oh why, won't they take our ace? Another day and we'll go clear mad and eat him ourselves. How can they resist him?"

Their ace was the twenty-first man who had appeared among them after the correct count had been twenty. The secret about him was that he was not a man at all but a kit. He was a kit, and the men had each one of them carried a part of that kit strapped to his belly to be assembled when a real emergency arrived. Their situation in the Polyphemian dungeon was such an emergency, and they had assembled the kit.

His name was Esolog-9-Ex and he was a build-it-yourself pseudanthropus kit. You never know when you are going to need such an automaton, and many hornet-men had formed the habit of carrying such portions of one.

The men had had fun with Esolog-9 in the past, particularly in the happy days of the war. You remember the time they had constructed him into a cardshark? Into a hillbilly? Into a peddler? One of the best had been when they constructed him into a crackpot general. This pseudo-general issued a series of the weirdest and most asinine orders ever heard. They resulted in more than ten thousand men going to their deaths needlessly. It was excessive, but it was funny.

On Bandicoot the natives had found parts of such a kit on dead soldiers of the back-drift of the war, had assembled him into a ruler, and he still rules Bandicoot today. For these kits could be built to be anything in man form.

And in the Polyphemian dungeon the crewmen had built Esolog-9 into a fat man. He was not an ordinary fat man. He was made to rant and rave more than any of them. And another element was set into him, a sialagogue that tantalized the men, that set up such a flow of juice in them all that they almost drowned in their own slaver. They'd have stuck a fork in him if they had one. The wonder is that they did not eat him themselves. And the high wonder of it all is that the Polyphemians had left him so long.

Day after day the Polyphemians selected other men, fat, but not so fat as Esolog; succulent, but not so succulent as he; ravening, but not with his own special rage.

"Why do they not take him?" Roadstrum moaned again. "We go to our deaths, and it seems as if they will leave the finest one of us till last."

And the point is that the Ace-in-the-Hole, Esolog-9-Ex, was booby-trapped. To eat him was to suffer the swelling death, the exploding death. One would swell and swell and swell, to three times one's size, to nine times one's size, to a thousand times one's size. One would explode and completely destroy oneself and everything around.

"Why don't they take him, and we be released from our misery?" all the men groaned.

Then, one afternoon, Margaret told them that the Polyphemians would take Esolog-9 that very night. They knew, of course, that Esolog was the best of them all, and they had been saving him for a very special occasion. That special occasion had arrived. Some cousins of the Polyphemians from another place had come to visit them. That night would be the finest of all banquets, and Esolog-9-Ex would be the crown of the feast.

"He will destroy them all," said Roadstrum. "Then you will bring us the keys to the dungeon, Margaret, and we will escape. But see that you are at a safe distance from it, and most especially see that you do not eat any of him."

"I say I will not, and I say I will not," said Margaret, "but can I be sure that I will not? Oh oh oh, he will be good! How can I say I will not eat a little bit?"

"Margaret, Margaret, it would be your destruction," Roadstrum warned. "You must be very shrewd in this. Do not eat any of him. And be far distant when the Polyphemians have eaten fully."

"I say I will not, and I say I will not, but can I be sure I will not?"

The Polyphemians came for Esolog-9 in the early evening. He went to his death as dapper a dog as ever went, and his joking was genuine. He was cool; he hadn't a nerve in him. You had to admire him, even if he was no man at all, but an assembled kit. And he raved and ranted as was expected of him when in the hands of the Polyphemians. He was perfect.

The men waited the news, and Margaret brought them hourly bulletins. She reported that the Polyphemians had begun on him. She reported a second time that the Polyphemians had devoured him all except for a few pieces hardly to be seen. And finally she reported to them that the Polyphemians had begun to swell and swell and swell.

"You know where the keys are, Margaret? You will be able to find them in the wreckage?"

"I know where they are. I will bring them to you as soon as the show is over."

"And don't get too near, Margaret."

"No, no, I'll stay well clear of it."

And Margaret did not have to report to them when the big thing came. It was a rumble like walls going down; it was a sound like a distant dam bursting. Then it was an explosion that shook all Polyphemia to its deepest roots.

By the time their ears were functioning again, Margaret brought them the keys and let them out. Starkhead did not come out. He had eaten nothing since they entered. He was peculiarly inert and cold to the touch and offensive to the nose. One never admits that a hornet-man is dead, it is against the code, but they buried him there in the floor of the dungeon.

And they could not budge Crewman Burpy. He had grown grosser and fatter than any of them, fatter even than Esolog-9, but the Polyphemians had passed him up. He was too placid; they had such sheep of their own; there was nothing rampant about him. He had grown so heavy that he could no longer stand on his own legs, and they left him without a lot of regret.

Freedom from the dungeon, and now the freedom of the skies. No need now to repair the crippled hornet. There were men left to man one craft only, and it would be a little crowded, so large had they grown.

Deep John looked at himself. "Men, men, it was hobo heaven," he said, "and out of it alive. Whoever saw a genuine hobo with such a pot on him."

So they enskied. They were in high space. And in time they would regain their fine lines and their wonderful tempers. Freedom freedom!

"Boys, I don't feel well," said Margaret the houri.

"You shouldn't, you female cannibal," Roadstrum growled. "You saved us in the end, but you didn't treat us at all well in the middle."

"Boy, I feel terrible," she said.

"It is a wonder you do not die of remorse," said Captain Puckett.

"Remorse this is not. I'm going to burst."

"Look out, look out," Crewman Clamdigger warned. "Maggy was fat, but not that fat. She's three times the size she was when we loaded in the hornet."

"You ate, you ate part of him!" Roadstrum howled furiously.

"Only a little sliver. I don't care. It was worth it. Boys, I'm going to burst."

And she had already taken up three-quarters of the hornet and crowded all the men, gasping and straited, into a tight corner. She had begun to rumble, and she would go any minute, and all with her.

"She'll blow! She'll blow!" howled the frightened men. "She'll blow, and she'll blow up the ship and all of us with her." And there came the still deeper rumble that one hears just before the sundering explosion.

Perils! And there would be more of them. And they were still years from home.

*The Chantey pleads a lapse and leaves a doubt of it.  
We don't know how the hearty crew got out of it!*

*What tales you hear with reason may you doubt them all.  
They could not be! And yet the men got out them all.*

*Remember not the jokes they made to bluff it off,  
What ghastly thing they suffered, and to sluff it off.*

*Withhold the question where such brave men cry a lot.  
Remember also hornet-crewmen lie a lot.*

Ibid

## CHAPTER SIX

*A feckless fate had foiled their path and ditched them there.  
A lady with a lilty way had witched them there.*

*She thought to light a scorchy flame at least in them,  
And had to settle for the risen beast in them.*

*Fell dangers from the charmer and the hair of her,  
Beware of her! Beware of her! Beware of her!—*

*As deft and devious as Ancient Niccolo—  
Now sing her song, strum harp, and pip the piccolo.*

Ibid

IT WAS scramble on all their data. Their direction and course were gone. They found themselves in the mysterious realm of middle space, which has no real bearings. But there are shoals and obstacles there.

“What is here, you confabulating canister?” Roadstrum demanded of the data log. “What things are these drifting in the space about us?”

“Here there are warlocks and mandragoras and witches,” the navigation data log issued.

“When your machines start to go droll on you you’re in trouble,” Roadstrum growled. “I can get wise answers from my men. I don’t need a machine for that.”

“He thinks he is men,” Crewman Bramble explained. “He has been with men always and does not know other machines.”

“Fix the idiot thing, Bramble. Fix it,” Roadstrum ordered.

So Crewman Bramble fiddled with the data log a while and then announced that it was fixed. “Bad connection,” he said. “That’s what I always say, isn’t it?”

“All right, Log, now give a straight answer,” Roadstrum ordered. “Where are we, and what are these drifting things about us?”

“Here there are warlocks and mandragoras and witches,” the log issued once more. “Kill me, torture me, I can say nothing else.”

“Who has been feeding nonsense to this machine?” Roadstrum demanded.

They had narrow misses of collisions with things that apparently weren’t there at all. The things seemed solid till very near approach, and then they faded to mist. It was illusion space they were in.

“Ram them, ram them,” Roadstrum roared every time an object loomed up. “If we pass through them without harm we will know that they aren’t really there.”

“All right,” issued the data log, and they rammed through several objects that had seemed quite solid, jagged, rocky, quite large bodies.

“What if we don’t pass through them without harm, Roadstrum?” Captain Puckett asked.

“Don’t know. I suppose that will mean they are real, if we have a real collision.”

“And it may mean that we aren’t real any longer,” said Crewman Clamdigger. “We could get unreal awful easy smashing into one of those things that was really there.”

There was another one of them looming up, a round little world of gold and green. It was overdone. It was too arty to be real. Whoever had thought it up may have had a certain

feeling for art, but none at all for planetary dynamics.

"That's the phoniest one yet," Roadstrum laughed. "Ram it, Log, ram it. I can see into the mind that made it up."

"So can I!" cried Margaret furiously. "It is Aeaea, the Aeaea mind. I hate her! Ram it, canny can, ram it!"

And the navigation log soared the hornet into ram it, and then somehow slackened off a little. They came in at too low a speed for a real ramming job, and the world took on further reality from their hesitation.

"You fumbling idiot," Roadstrum fumed. "You half accepted it on its own terms, so now it is half there. Too close to it to veer now, and it's getting too solid to take a chance going right through. Slow it and land. What happened to you anyhow?"

"Lost my nerve," the navigation data log issued.

"Oh, that damned Aeaea!" Margaret exploded again. "I've run into it and her a hundred different times in different parts of the universe. She and that silly planet of hers! She doesn't have a regular place. She hangs it anywhere. And now we've got to land on it. I hate her!"

They landed on Aeaea. They made a bad landing. They first buried themselves in the soft surface that was like smoke. Then they had to back out and let it solidify. They got out and walked, and it was tricky. Aeaea hadn't made her world very thoroughly. For the place was not charted and not generally believed in. The surface was full of nothing-holes. But it firmed, it firmed, it became a workable theory, it became a fact.

"Aeaea!" Roadstrum hooted. "We all know that it shouldn't be here. Whoever heard of coming onto a myth in actuality. I'd say annihilate all myths and be done with it."

"Easy, easy, fine Roadstrum," Margaret cautioned. "What do you think I am?"

"Oh, but this breaks it, Maggie! It would hardly startle me to hear the lady sing."

"No, no, Roadstrum. Give her an ear and she'll take it all. She's worse than the Siren-Zo, and she has a more hideous song. Let's zoom away from this place; it becomes too solid."

But it did startle Roadstrum when he heard the lady sing. It startled them all when they heard it. It was high and clear, and not far away. There was an artiness about that singing that is beyond art. It would have been better if it were not quite as good, but it was remarkable singing.

They were in the center of the singing, and they were all trapped. Then they were in the center of a new silence, in a world inside the song. And there was a nice enough lady there, but could she be Aeaea herself?

"We are strangers, lost and bemused," Roadstrum said to the lady. "We landed here by accident. We are looking for the lady who was singing, the lady who (according to silly myth) is identical with the planet and who sang the planet into being."

"And now we have found you," Margaret interrupted rudely. "Scat, you wood pussy, down on your four legs and skat!"

"The Margaret be mute!" the lady ordered, and the Margaret was frozen into an angry crouching statue. Fire in her eyes and slaver on her mouth, but she could not move or speak.

"I am the lady," the lady said then, "and there is no lady here except myself. I am Aeaea. To my notion there is no other lady anywhere. And I resent your calling this a silly myth. I made the myth and it is not silly; charming rather. Well, come along, come along! You are my things now, and you will come when I call you."

They all followed her like children—they did not know where.

They came to fine quarters, or perhaps it was that the fine quarters came to them. These things seemed to form about them, and there was no real distance traversed.

"A dish, a doll, a droll, a dream," Crewman Clamdigger breathed.

"A girl, a grig, a gleam, a glom," Crewman Trochanter gobbled.

And Margaret hissed. She would never remain entirely mute, that one. She was still unable to move, yet she was still with them in their quarters. There was something the matter with these quarters. They seemed not to be designed for people at all. For something, but not for people.

"Be you all at ease," said the lady Aeaea in her musical voice. "When you have rested and eaten there will be time to admire me. The Margaret may eat from the bowl on the floor, and the rest of you in your fine stalls—ah cubicles. The mighty Road-Storm will come and talk with me.

"A larkin, a limpet, a lass!" admired Captain Puckett. They liked the lady.

"All right, girl," Roadstrum said when they were alone. "I have a few questions. They will be to the point, and I want answers."

"I doubt that you could understand the answers," Aeaea warned. "I see now that you are a common simpleminded man, and we maintain a very high intellectual average here. It will be difficult to communicate."

"Who is the 'we' that maintains so high an average, girl?"

"Only myself now. My father has been dead these last several centuries."

"It should be easy to maintain a high average with only one entity."

"It is. I am mistress of all the sciences. I go so far beyond all else that my work is called magic. I manipulate noumena, regarding monads as points of entry tangential to hylomorphism. As to the paradox of Primary Essence being contained in Quiddity, the larger in the smaller, I have my own solution. The difficulty is always in not confusing Contingency with Accident. Do you understand me?"

"Sure. You're a witch."

"Exactly, but I frown on the name. Very unscientific. But I am no ordinary witch. I studied in Salamanca the hidden."

"Salamanca, the underground witchcraft school? But that was on World, in the Indias, in the New Latin Lands."

"There are entrances to it on World, Road-Storm, but do you not know that the underground lands are shared by many worlds? It is all one underground, a vast place, and it is but a trick on which globe one will surface on coming out. This is the reason that the inside of every world is so much vaster than the outside. You are fooled by the shape of these little balls on which things live and crawl; you see the universe inside-out; you see the orbs as containing and not contained. I will teach you to see it right if you please me."

"On with it, witch, on with it."

"I am the consummate scientist, Road-Storm. Science has suffered in having her name applied to mechanics, an ugly stepchild of hers. Matter itself is a humiliation to the serious. We cannot make it vanish forever, but can make it seem to. For my purpose that is even better. All matter can be modified as long as it is kept subjective. Let us keep it so."

"Yes. Let's do that, Aeaea."

"Those who fail to understand my science may call it magic or hypnotism or deception. But it is only my projection of total subjectivity. I will bring one of my creatures and you will see what I mean."

"Bring it on, gay girl! Hey, I feel as lively as a monkey here," Roadstrum laughed.

Aeaea left him then, and her singing filled the halls when she was gone. They were fine halls of marble, polished travertine. No crack or grain at all in their walls. But if one took a total subjective view and wished them to be less perfect? Yes, they were not really travertine, but an inferior marble; not marble really, but ordinary limestone; not that either, but adobe, mud really. Roadstrum kicked holes in the walls, and a great part of them fell down.

"Why hokey!" he said. "I can make marble halls myself. I wonder how many others know how? A thing like that could come in handy."

Then he formed them to travertine marble again, being very subjective about it. He heard Aeaea coming again, her wonderful singing drawing nearer, and he was a little leery of her. She would know many tricks, and he had only partly learned one of them.

She came singing, and she brought a pet raccoon with her. Roadstrum guffawed to see the thing. This was real art! You would practice a long time before you made a thing as comic and clownish as that, and yet at the same time calling out all compassion and sympathy. A coon would no more be only a coon to Roadstrum; this one was really a person. A burlesque, of course, a caricature and a perfect one, a simulacrum with a soul. It was a solid cartoon of a little animal made by a real master.

"It's good, Aeaea," Roadstrum said heartily. "I never saw anything better even in the Natural Arts Museum on Camiroi. Has he seen it? You really take him off with that?"

"Has who seen it, Road-Storm? Of whom does it remind you?"

Roadstrum chuckled with real amusement. "It looks just like Puckett. I might almost say that it is Puckett. What other animal but a coon would he look like? Was it live to begin with, Aeaea? Did it really look like that, or have you only made it look like that?"

"I have explained to you, Road-Storm, that there is no difference between appearing and being, so long as we keep matter subjective. You have not paid attention."

Ah, the angry and at the same time pathetic eyes on that coon!

"Just like Puckett himself, Aeaea," Roadstrum mused. "Even the tail is the sort of tail he'd have if he had one. This is a new art that surpasses anything. You are a genius, Aeaea."

"I have always thought so, Road-Storm. He is so sweet, the little raccoon, but if he bites me one more time I'll break out every cute tooth he has."

"Let's get Puckett here to look at this. Will he recognize himself in caricature?"

"Mighty Road-Storm, do you not understand yet?"

"Understand what? Would Puckett be offended?"

"Of course he is offended. That is why he bites me."

"What? What? I don't believe it. This is not Puckett."

"It is. There is no Puckett anywhere except here. This is High-Captain Puckett, commander of hornets. This is your friend and companion in his new form. You see him like this, I see him like this, he sees himself like this, and therefore—"

"Oh shut up, witch! I don't believe you. I'll find him."

Roadstrum went roaring through the halls to find High-Captain Puckett. Aeaea sang behind him and all around and laughed as she sang. Roadstrum found Crewman Humphrey.

"When did you last see Puckett, Humph?" he demanded of him.

"I don't know," Humphrey fluttered oddly from his upper lip. "He went with the lady, I think. He looked kind of funny."

"Puckett looked funny! Look at yourself, you straddling kaymo! What's happened to you?"

"I don't know," Humphrey fluttered with that rubbery lip. Humphrey *did* look funny. Humphrey had always looked funny, but this was different. Roadstrum would think of the difference in a minute.

"There goes Puckett now," Crewman Eseldon brayed suddenly. "See him there climbing up that plant."

"You ass, that's a coon!" Roadstrum roared. "Was there ever such an ass?"

There never was. The horrible truth swept over Roadstrum in waves while the weird singing of Aeaea rose and fell. It had happened to all those men. The likeness had been so good, and he himself so upset, that Roadstrum had not noticed it happening.

Humphrey had looked funnier than usual. Humphrey had turned into a camel. That's enough to make anyone look funny. "But what right has she to turn my men into camels and coons?" Roadstrum asked angrily. "They are persons inviolate and should not be subverted to animals. Aeaea, Aeaea, come here and give an accounting!"

Crewman Eseldon was now an ass. He had always been one, but now he was one physically. The change seemed to have got all the men. "Hollering won't do it," Roadstrum hollered. "It's time I did some rapid and dynamic thinking about this thing. Come you together here, men, creatures, animals, pseudomorphs, companions of my bosom. Come together here and we will hold congress on this affair."

They came, they came. Was this only group hypnosis? Or had they actually changed? Aeaea said that seeming and being were the same thing. Roadstrum attempted to fight her on her own ground. He became very subjective about it all. He had been able to turn travertine marble to clay-mud and back to marble, but he could not turn these things back to man-form.

Crewman Septimus was now a rabbit. With that cleft upper lip and those pink eyes he could not say anything else. Crewman Swinnert was a hog, a good solid hog, the kind you'd like to be if you had to be one. Ursley was a bear. Margaret the houri was an alley cat (that was the first mistake that Aeaea made; it was not a metamorphosis for Margaret to become an alley cat, that was her true form).

Crewmen Clamdigger and Threefountains and Trochanter, three tall stags, great horny wild stags. Those boys had always had a lot of spring to them, and now they were ranging and leaping wildly. Deep John was a polecat. "I always did like folks to treat me with a certain decent reserve," he said. Crewman Bramble was a fox. He had always been the smartest of them, but if he was so smart how come he was taken in this?

"If any of you have any ideas, tell them to me," Roadstrum begged. "Fortunately for you all, the lady Aeaea has an imperfect idea of animals. I believe that she has led a secluded life, that she has never seen real animals. She leaves you with the powers of human speech, for an instance, and that is rare in animals. But I at least have remained a man, and out of my great mind I will fabricate some device to free you from all this."

And they laughed at him. They who had been captain and crewmen and hobo and houri laughed at the Captain Roadstrum, laughed foolish giggly gobbly animal laughs. And he was furious.



"Ah, she left you your men's voices, but she took away your men's brains. Foolish gibbering things hardly worth saving. But for the great love I bear you in your real forms I will find a way to save you yet. I am a man yet, and I will find the way to lead you back to the man context."

They laughed and giggled yet. You have heard stags laughing? You have heard donkeys and polecats laughing? Yes, but have you ever heard a kinkajou laughing? It runs down your spine like an idiot, that laughing. That was Crewman Lawrence in his new form.

"There has to be a converse to all this," Roadstrum maintained, but he was full of doubt now. "I'll break the spell or the science of her singing yet. As the only man left it devolves to me to do it."

There was high laughter in the singing now, and Aeaea came to them assembled there. They all gathered around her, except Margaret, and were completely charmed by her. Animals! Animals!

But Roadstrum was more than surprised when Aeaea swung him up under her arm and set him astride her shoulders. It was pleasant but puzzling. Either she had become very large or he had become very small.

The reflection in the polished wall gave him the answer. Mighty Roadstrum had become a very small ape. Angriily he leaped down. He didn't like it.

"Many men have become the pet apes of beautiful women," he gibbered in monkey voice, "but I will not have it happen to me literally. And I was small ape all the time that I trumpeted I was the only man left? No wonder that the animals laughed."

But it had happened; it had happened to all of them. How does one accustom himself to being an animal? Roadstrum refused, and held apart. But Aeaea became the center of the lives of the rest of them, and in a day or two she had them hooked.

They were her animals. She maintained their jealousies, fondling one and then the other, keeping them subservient to her. They were her creatures, and she gloried in them.

It would seem that she must be injured or crashed or slashed to death or ground to death, and Aeaea did not seem the durable type. Half a ton of camel in her lap was no great thing, perhaps, but when she went into her frolicking wrestle with Ursley the bear it was a fearful thing. When she went for canters with Eseldon the ass she bore him on her back as often as he bore her on his, and he was quite a big donkey, yet they seemed to have a gay, galloping time of it. The coon and the kinkajou slashed her with teeth, the three great horny stags leaped all over her. Stag-man Trochanter learned to balance with all four feet on her shoulders, and he was big as a horse.

"It is all in being subjective, Apie Road-Storm," she explained. "But of course I am slashed and I bleed, and I am crushed and ground down and broken. I want to be. I have a passion for these things. It is the animal in myself. And yet all these things are in my mind only. They are private fantasies of mine, as are you, most wonderful of apes. You all love me, you know. If you did not, I would make new fantasies."

All loved her except Margaret the alley cat. And Margaret was a violation of Aeaea's thesis. It was axiomatic that all her creatures should love her, said Aeaea; therefore the alley cat loved her also. But Margaret had hateful ways of showing her love.

But Roadstrum still plotted for freedom. He plotted with Margaret the alley cat, with Deep John the polecat, with Puckett the raccoon, and with Bramble the fox.

But had not Bramble died and been eaten by the Polyphemians? No, he had not, it only seemed that he had. He was always too much of a fox to be taken and eaten, but the trick by which he evaded it will not be given here.

Something was working in Roadstrum's little ape head. When he had been a man he had always known when it was time for action; particularly he had always known the last moment when action was still possible. He knew now that that moment was come very near. He was sinking deeper in his animalness every hour.

Puckett the coon resisted, but with entirely too much deference. "We should let the lady know that we do not always wish to remain animals," he said. "We must present this protest firmly to the lady. We must take the bull by the tail, as the ancient adage has it, and tell the lady that we are not entirely pleased with our state."

Then a blinding light burst on Roadstrum, and he saw the truth of the situation. Many things Roadstrum was not, and it was sometimes wondered why he was the natural leader of all the men. He was their leader because he was a man on whom the blinding light sometimes

descended.

"I've got it, I've got it," he shouted. He gibbered it like an ape? No, he shouted it like a man. He had his man's voice back again. "I've got it, guys, I've got it! We have been taking the bull by the wrong organ. The witch has played a semantic trick on us. We were already pretty salty animals when we came here! It is toy animals she has turned us into. We have been working against ourselves, trying to be men again, but to be her idea of men, since we live in her context. But she does not know real animals, or men.

"Listen, listen; what we must do now is become more animal, and not less animal. Assemble, assemble all.

"Toy creatures, puppets, tame things!" he thundered. "Be real animals! Raise it up in you! Show the witch what real animals are. Resurrect the old beast!"

"No, no," they twittered. "Aeaea has already turned us into animals with her singing. Someday, but not today or tomorrow, we will become men again for a little while, if she will permit it. But we are animals now, Ape. Your words are mixed."

"Hear my man words, hear my animal words!" Roadstrum bellowed. "Be you not toys any longer! Stir up the wild business in you. You have to be real animals before you can be men. How could Roadstrum be the tame ape of any woman? Puckett, be you a real bear coon while you are a coon! Humphrey, be you a cob camel at least! Ye three great stags, be rampant and musky stags! Ursley, let out the great growl, be a bear and not a toy bear! Septimus! Swinnert! Eseldon! All! Raise it up in you!"

The arty singing of Aeaea turned into a scream, but a sincere one. Reality, raw murderous reality broke into her contrived world. Terror had come to the planet Aeaea, and it would never be the same again. The lady Aeaea had become a sniffing screaming old lady now, and only Eseldon the ass remained with her. An ass is all she deserved.

No, no, it cannot be given here! The blood would be all over you, on your hands and in your heart, and you would never be able to get rid of it. It was horrifying, animal, human slaughter, the brutish murder of a concept and a person. It would sear your eyes to watch it.

Of what did the great revolt consist? Some say that it was a cosmic gang-shag that left the lady near dead and in terror for the rest of her life, never again to dabble in toy animals. But most agree that she was left dead indeed, though perhaps not from her own viewpoint. And some say that it was an elemental surge, so much more horrifying than a mere attack that it cannot safely be put into words.

Margaret, of course, was in the middle of it. Nobody had ever doubted her animality.

"I'll shred that lark; I'll shred her yet," she had sworn. And Margaret grew to be a larger and larger cat. "I see myself as a very large cat, you all see me as a very large cat, she will see me as one, and therefore I will be one." Margaret had become bobcat sized, leopard sized. Her tail twitched and her whiskers vibrated. She'd have that songbird; for Aeaea, in her terror, had begun to look very like a bird. Ape and cat and coon and fox had been practicing at seeing her as a bird, and it worked.

Margaret went for Aeaea, and they all went for her. She was torn open in throat and breast, she was rent apart, she was ground down, she was trampled and stomped, she was bitten and clawed, she was defaced (that Margaret took the face clear off of her with a final sweep of her tigress claws), she was annihilated. She was dead.

Dead, dead, nothing left, except the song that had turned into a scream that still hung in the air. And the bloody pulp that had almost no resemblance to a body. She was stubborn, though, that Aeaea, and she had her own philosophy.

"I am as I have always been," said Aeaea. "You can all see that there is no blood on me." Well, there was quite a bit of blood around, much of it on the cat Margaret. She reveled in the feathers and blood on her paws and face, quite a bit of blood.

"I see myself as unhurt," Aeaea continued (there was the broken remnant of a body on the ground, and there was the voice in the air). "Surely you all see me as unhurt. Therefore I *am* unhurt even though (as it happens) I have just died horribly. Now you had better all be gone. I hate sticky farewells, and what is left of me has become very sticky."

"Aeaea, whichever is you, the voice in the air, or the bloody thing on the ground, there is a flaw in your philosophy. You really are dead, you know. You begin to fade away, and so does your world. Hey, we'd better get off this thing while there's still something left to get off!" Roadstrum trumpeted.

"Would you sing for us once more," asked Humphrey the apprehensive camel, who was becoming uncameled.

“Yes, do,” said Margaret. She was back in her human or houri form now. “How about ‘Mouth Full of Feathers’? That’s a good boogie song. Or the ‘Dying Canary.’ I always did like the ‘Dying Canary.’ ” Margaret was a little cruel.

“I can sing no more,” said Aeaea. “I fade, I fade. But do I not carry it all off well?”

She did, she did. But now the murder howl had gone over the space-ways, and they were all outlaws to be hunted. And decent people would no more give them haven.

*She sought with song to make the townsle toys of them,  
She hadn’t recked the ruddy reckless boys of them.*

*She sold her reputation for a song she did,  
And paid a reparation for the wrong she did.*

*The “Songstress Murder” made the space-ways gape to hear,  
The stunning scandal, murder, wreck, and rape to hear.*

*A killer clan! The avid law is chilled for it,  
And deems that they be hunted down and killed for it.*

*And Roadstrum cast a youngish pelt aside of him,  
And came down near the tough essential hide of him.*

Ibid

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*The cream of Horneteers, the high elite of them!  
And sky-wolves snapping at the bloody feet of them!*

*In Guimbarde town, it rude! it raw! ramshackle it!  
They sought the crushing, crashing way to tackle it.*

*For noble lies and every royal whopper there  
They'd kill the kerl who couldn't tell a topper there.*

*Inside the Club itself, the most exclusive yet,  
Came snuffling death:—and they be more elusive yet!*

*From flying hoosegow, sudden-swift, the ratter ran  
Who cut all trails and read the Gypsy patteran.*

*He blew the blast! And they be hustled well and gone.  
And after that they went a while to Hell and gone.*

Ibid

IT WAS the most exclusive club in the world, in all the worlds, and this is a mighty pale statement to make about it. Let us emphasize that it was hard to get into.

It was a hundred and thirteen stories up by one count, a hundred and nineteen by another, and nobody was sure how close either might be. Naturally the Club did not have a room or suite number, no more than did any other thing in those buildings.

It was in one of those weird, wooden buildings of Guimbarde Town, and the buildings of Guimbarde Town have neither elevators nor zoom-rooms. How could they have? There is no corridor nor shaft in any of them straight enough for such contrived transportation.

It was in one of those thousand-odd steep wooden buildings that crown Blind-Raven hill, tall shanties, most of them over a hundred stories (there is no exact count in any of these buildings) that the Club is found. These buildings lean together and prop each other up; and when one of them topples and falls (and it happens quite often) several others will usually fall with it.

The building no longer had a name, or at least no name that applied to all of it: there were local names that applied to various parts of it. Long ago it had been the Ramshackle Hotel, but the lower nine stories of it had sunk into the mud (they used no foundations in Guimbarde Town) and various tribes and peoples still lived subterraneously there. At a little later time, a dozen upper stories had fallen from the building onto the Greenglanders Building and had been incorporated into that; and very many of the middle stories had burned. But to make up for what it had lost, in simple justice it had received thirteen stories fallen from the old Potters' Steeple, dropping from the sky, as it were. These were conjoined crookedly to the old basic (these segments never do fall straight), and all the higher stories later added to the building were crooked.

Well, how do you get up even a hundred and thirteen or a hundred and nineteen stories to arrive at the Club? You go up those old outside stairways, and they sure are dangerous! There will sometimes be five or nine stories missing from the stairway, and there you must

scramble. There are places where you must pay toll or fight your way through. There are cliff-dweller Indians in the mid-sixties who drink out of the skulls of those who thought it a safe thing to go up that stairway.

All this, you must know, is the finest section of Guimbarde Town, not the meanest; and Guimbarde Town is the finest city on Yellow Dog. Yellow Dog itself has lost its world license, is now a proscribed world, and is inhabited mostly by shiftless and shifty persons.

So it is seen that the Club is not an easy place to get into. Why not come down to it from above, you say, in gracious copter or in sky car? They don't use them there. The skies over Guimbarde Town, and indeed over the whole of Yellow Dog, are infested by Megagaster birds that can take all but the largest craft in a single gobble. And yet Roadstrum and his brave outlaws *did* come down into the Club from above.

"How can we land? How can we land?" Roadstrum had fretted at the top of his voice.

"Leave it to Bramble," said Captain Puckett. "He'll think of something."

"Leave it to me," said Bramble. "I'll think of something. Hey, you know those nineteen cases of Mumuckey mustard that we have carried for so long a time? Often we've had little room for food or water, and have been forced to sleep three deep. Some of you have howled that we should throw the mustard out so there would be room for ourselves. 'Let us keep them,' I said every time; 'we will find something they are good for.' Now we have found it. We will foil the Megagaster birds with our mustard, and we will land on this planet."

Willing crewmen got out and, working dangerously, coated the entire hornet craft half a meter thick with Mumuckey mustard. Then they came into the dangerous sky of Yellow Dog.

What happened to them? What happens to every craft that enters that dangerous sky? They were gobbled up in one bite by a Megagaster bird.

One account is that they went right through that bird like yellow flame. Another is that it bounced them around nine times in its maw and then spat them out with a cry of disgust and horror. They crashed down through the top dozen flimsy floors of a building and came to rest in the Club. They got out of the hornet craft and looked around.

It was dark there. The more exclusive a club is, the darker it always is. There was no light there at all except the luminescent eyes of some of the creatures present. This, however, was light enough, once they got accustomed to it.

"This is the Improbable Club," said the President-Emeritus in a heavy muffled voice, "and you things have made an improbable entry. Many unqualified persons have attempted to crash this Club, but you have done it literally. Whether you will be able to qualify for our high membership is another thing. It will not matter. We accept, for a brief moment at least, all who come here as members. We will quickly measure you one way or another. We have no living ex-members. Sit you down, all, and unwind your ears. Remember, each topper must be topped."

"If not?" Roadstrum asked boldly, not understanding this jabber at all.

"The stopper," said the President-Emeritus. This worthy seemed hardly human, but he was a genial person, in a hard-eyed sort of way.

"What's the fellow talking about?" Roadstrum asked Crewman Bramble. "What is this Improbable Club that we have fallen into?"

"I'm not sure, Captain Roadstrum," said Bramble. "The name is, perhaps, a euphemism. There is a crest on the old weapons-rack in the corner, and it reads 'Club Menitros.' Is this the Club Itself whose very location is unknown, the club for membership in which Emperors might give their right galactic segment, the club so exclusive that for a full century it had no members at all? Is this the High Liars Club itself?"

Roadstrum and all the crewmen bowed their heads. "If it be so, we will all try to be worthy of it," they murmured.

The half-dozen members were drinking loopers, the green-lightning drink, and now a liveried waiter brought them to the crewmen also.

Margaret the houri, who had been larking around in other parts of the building, came in to them now.

"I met a fast-talking fellow and I'm going to World with him," she said. "I'd go with you, but the word is that you're not going there."

"But yes, we will go in our hornet as soon as we are sure we have given the slip to the sky-police," Roadstrum said.

"Three families have already moved into your hornet," Margaret said. "You couldn't get them evicted in a month. Besides, the word is out that you're not going anywhere in that

hornet, ever. I guess I'll just go to World with this fast-talking fellow."

"Our fellowship begins to break up," said Roadstrum sadly. "Goodbye, Margaret, you'll miss us."

Deep John the Vagabond, who had likewise been making connections, came back.

"I'm going to hook a night freight to World, fellows," he said. "I'd go with you, but the word is out that you're not going to World. And where you are going, I don't want to go."

"The word is not out until we put it out," Roadstrum said. "I myself intend to go to World very soon."

But Deep John had left them.

"One of the members there reminds me of someone," Roadstrum whispered to Puckett. "The fellow with the green scarf."

"He looks familiar to me also, Roadstrum," said Puckett. "I'm on the verge of thinking whom he reminds me of."

And there was another fellow there who seemed to be, like the hornet-men, on trial membership. He was a curious creature with a knot in the middle of his forehead, with one red eye, and with the other eye covered by a patch.

"You may begin, Probationary," the President-Emeritus said. "Be not nervous. In a very little while you will either be a member, or you will not be."

But the red-eye began nervously for all that.

"I come from a very poor planet. We have no exports except our own citizens, going to better ourselves in other places. We have no talent, can perform few tasks, and have no trade on alien worlds except one. We work as traffic lights."

"As traffic lights?" Roadstrum asked, though he was not sure that a probationary member should be asking questions. "How as traffic lights?"

"All on our world are born with one red eye and one green eye," the creature said. "Our eyes shine brightly, as you see that my red eye shines brightly here now. We offer our services, we stand on corners in fair weather and foul, and we blink first one eye and then the other. The pay is everywhere miserable, the conditions are hard, but it is a livelihood."

The President-Emeritus motioned to three ushers, and they approached grimly.

"Why is the one eye bandaged, and what is the knot in the middle of your forehead?"

"If one wished to work on a good corner anywhere, and have a little better conditions, he had to have an amber eye also," the creature said, very nervously. "The amber eye is not natural to us, so I have had an implant but it is not yet completely formed. It will grow, and it will break open, I believe, by springtime. In the meanwhile my green eye is inflamed. It's the messages I have to flash on it that have done it in. The 'walks' and the 'don't walks' I can manage easily enough. It's the special things, the 'No left turns except on Sunday or before eight A.M.' things like that have inflamed it. It isn't easy to flash a variety of messages."

"Enough of that," said the President-Emeritus. "I believe you hardly qualify, and if you continue with your jabber it will get worse. Why can folks not understand that this Club is not for amateurs?"

The ushers slit the fellow's throat, opened a trapdoor in the floor, and dropped him through. He fell three hundred and fifty meters, the building having a lean there and this part of the story being out over empty air.

"I understand what he meant," Roadstrum whispered to Puckett, "when he said, 'In a very little while you will either be a member, or you will not be.' I am not sure that all our men will be able to qualify. They are good ordinary liars, but the extraordinary is expected here."

"That fellow with the green scarf bothers me more and more," Puckett whispered. "He reminds me very much of someone we have met in our travels, something about the brow, something about his grin."

And it was to the fellow with the green scarf that the President-Emeritus turned now. "Give us one of yours, Horace," the P-E said, "anything to get the taste of the late ineptitude out of our ears."

"Sammy the Snake!" Roadstrum said suddenly and loudly. "Pardon me, sir, but are you any kindred of Sammy the Snake, the gambler on Roulettenwelt?"

"My cousin," said the fellow with the green scarf. "I am Horace the Snake. Fellows, these travelers know Sammy."

All the crewmen could see the resemblance now. It was something about the brow, of course, and something about the grin. It was also the flickering forked tongue and the thirty-meter long torso. Cousins! They could almost have been brothers!

"Ah, I'll tell you about the time I used to be a baseball player," Horace began. "I had natural disabilities for this sport, for it had been originally a human game not designed for snakes. And, after humans, it was the giant frogs who played it best, especially at my chosen position, shortstop. Those fellows could really get the hop on a ball. And I, a poor earth-crawler, had to make my way by diligence and persistency.

"In my apprentice years I had a mighty sore mouth from catching that ball, and I never could throw it at all. But I could reach it. With my tail anchored around second base, I could flop my head all the way to third, or first, instantly. In my ninety years on the diamond (we snakes are long-lived) I had fifty thousand double plays and ten thousand triple plays, all unassisted. This, I believe, is a record."

"How would you bat, Horace?" Roadstrum asked, entranced, for he had never heard Horace's stories before.

"Couldn't very well, Roadstrum. Had to take the bat crossways in my mouth and bunt. I'm telling you I really had a sore snout in my apprentice years. But I stayed with it and I learned. You've heard pitchers say they'll jam a ball down a fellow's throat. They did to me. I've swallowed more baseballs than any ball player who ever lived. The worst thing is, they passed a special ruling that I was out whenever I swallowed a pitched ball. I never did believe they should have charged me more than a strike for it."

"Still, if you *could* lay down a bunt, any sort of bunt—" Roadstrum saw the possibilities.

"I could and I did, Roadstrum. I got where I could lay them down, and they didn't have to be very good. I could stretch my length and have my head on first base before anyone could blink. And once I was on first, I was as good as around. I hold every base-stealing record in baseball. When the bases are ninety feet apart, and a fellow is a hundred and five feet long, how are you going to tag him out?"

"I believe I know a way to stop that stealing." Crewman Trochanter grinned evilly.

"I think I know what you mean, Trochanter." Horace the Snake smiled. "Horse-Hoof Harry tried it once when he was playing first base for the All-Star All Stars. Weighed nine tons, that fellow, and what hooves he did have on him! I still wake up screaming when I remember how he tromped on my tail just as I went into my stretch."

Crewman Trochanter chortled.

"But it was the last tail he ever tromped on, Trochanter," said Horace the Snake. "It was just about the last thing of any sort he ever did. I felt kind of sorry when his widow came around to see me that evening; but, as she said, it's all in the game."

Another person, perhaps human, had come into the Club. He was talking in a low voice with the President-Emeritus and with others. There was cursing, and the phrase "bird-killers" was heard.

"We had a bat-boy named Bennie," Horace the Snake continued. "He was a bat-boy literally, too small to handle the bats, but he flitted around merrily in the air."

"And how he could catch flies!" said Crewman Bramble.

"I hate a guy who's heard them all," said Horace the Snake.

One of the Club members, a florid colonel type, who dressed in the human style, was telling a steep tale of witty warfare and cunning conquest. The high hero of this was a great leader named Alley-Sally. It was a racy tale, and it excited Roadstrum.

"Puckett, Puckett," he whispered avidly, "just listen to this great stuff. Listen how it goes. What I would not give to be in on a campaign like that one! What I would not give to meet such a leader."

"Roadstrum, Roadstrum," Puckett chided. "It is yourself and ourselves he talks about; our own epic. Alley-Sally is yourself, Road-Storm. You remember that bit he's telling now, the six-day war in Wamtangle? Sure, that was a passing smart trick you devised there, Roadstrum. It's part of our own story he tells."

"Oh, I know that, Puckett. But he tells it so much better than it happened! Listen how they did it, Puckett! Listen to how smart their leader was! Oh, if I could only have been there!"

There was a lot of boy still left in Captain Roadstrum.

"One of the hornet-men will now tell a tale," said the President-Emeritus. "A slander against the hornet-men has been brought into this Club within the last several minutes. I do not believe this slander, but I say it is time the horneteers were tested. If they fail the test, then they be not members of the Club, and it will not matter if the slander is true. We will make it quick. Let one horneteer tell a colossal lie, and all be judged by it."

"Let me," said Captain Puckett. "A raconting man you are not, Roadstrum."

And this is the high tale that Captain Puckett told:

"When I was quite a young man and filled with the spirit of adventure and space-faring, I went out to the Daedalian Chersonese and visited a world known as Demetrio Four. Being an undisciplined youth (I speak of that time now in sorrow, having become a moral man in my maturity) I fell into a liaison with a local girl, one Miseremos. She was the light of my life and I was completely impassioned by her. Our affair went along charmingly, until one day her four brothers came and seized me. They examined me very carefully, and in a way that I could not understand. They said that, things being the way they were, Miseremos and myself must marry. I was not adverse to this, loving the girl mightily, though I resented somewhat the manner and compulsion of it.

"And marry we did, though I was quite puzzled by some of the accompanying rites. Then followed the weeks of deep enjoyment, though I was more and more puzzled. I felt strange and uncertain, and my wife, apparently, did not. 'Your brothers spoke of *Things being the way they are*, Miseremos,' I told her one day. 'And I look at you and wonder. How are things, Miseremos?'

"Do you not understand, dear Puckett?" she asked me. 'Oh, surely you understand! With us on Demetrio Four it is not the same as with folk elsewhere. We maintain our own most peculiar custom in this.'

"I hadn't known of that custom at all, but I was caught by it. On Demetrio Four it was not as it is elsewhere. I had heard the vaunt, 'The men of Demetrio accomplish what no man else has ever done,' but I had not understood it. With my dear Miseremos on Demetrio Four, it was I who had become pregnant."

"It reminds me of the young wife," said Horace the Snake, "who complained to her mother, 'My Robert is the most wonderful man in the world, but he simply can't bear children.'"

"My period was an easy one," said Captain Puckett, "and at length I gave birth by the natural method. It was a beautiful baby boy. Our joy was almost complete, and I had no suspicion that my time of shameful failure was at hand. Ah, better I had died in childbirth than have endured such shame!"

"What was it, good Captain Puckett?" asked the President-Emeritus. "In what did you fail shamefully?"

"Couldn't lactate," said Puckett. "My wife's brother had to nurse the child."

The Club members conferred among themselves. Puckett and Roadstrum and all the crewmen were being weighed in the balance. Was it good enough? Would the hasty tale of Puckett get them into the Club before the crisis (which they all felt but none of them understood) broke?

"Puckett, I didn't know you were ever on Demetrio Four or in the Daedalian Chersonese at all. It isn't in your record," Roadstrum whispered. "And the custom isn't mentioned in Fisher's Customs of the Nineteenth Sector. And, come to think of it, there are Demetrios One, Two, and Three, but there isn't any Demetrio Four."

"Be a little less of a boy for the moment, Roadstrum," whispered Puckett. "If we fail the Club, we have our throats slit. If we get into it, there is still a threat mounted here against our lives and liberties, but I believe we can claim asylum as members of the rarest club of them all."

"For one crime there is no asylum even in the Club," whispered Horace the Snake, who had sharp ears for whispering. "For all other crimes we give asylum, but for the most heinous crime in the universe we give no asylum."

"What is the most heinous crime in the universe?" Roadstrum asked.

"Killing a songbird."

The President himself came in dressed in the robes of his office. He conferred with the President-Emeritus and with the others. They were being very grim about the matter.

"I believe I understand it now," Crewman Bramble whispered to the Captains. "The arrival of a little while ago, he who looks at us so balefully, is not a man but a sherlocker. We are tracked down."

Yes, they could all see it now. The thing was a sherlocker, a sky-dick, a snuffling hound. It was a ratter, and they were the rats tracked down. The pipe and the deer-stalker hat were not adjuncts, but parts of its contrived head. It was a burlesque of an old archetypical human head, the Baker Street prototype, but the thing was a hound and it went on four legs (which they had not noticed before).



The President of the Club spoke now.

"In great sorrow I speak. All you the crewmen are accepted as members and are duly inscribed. But that members of the highest Club of all should be guilty of the most heinous crime in the universe! We will meet no more for one year, and we will deck our halls in mourning for a nine year period. Your accuser will speak now, and we share your contempt for him. But as for yourselves—how the shining ones have fallen!"

The thing, the dog, the sherlocker, the sky-dick, the latter cleared his throat and began.

"I am the latest model of sherlocker, the finest tracker in the universe. Here I had no real starting place since the site of the crime was a contingent one, having no regular location in real space. I had only the smell of a toy that the Roadstrum had played with when he was three years old, some knowledge of the thought patterns of the Bramble, and the information that Margaret the houri had no heartbeat and no heart.

"With great good fortune I first cut the trail after cruising nine megaparsecs at random. A little later I spied a bent clump of grass in empty space, and still later three twigs that pointed. Here and there I noticed that the hydrogen atoms were all bent in a certain direction. Shrewdly I noticed variations in the cosmic flux; something had passed to alter it. Then I cut the trail for the second time and had my direction.

"I am the snuffingest tracker ever, and I can read any patteran ever laid; one of my ancestors was a Gypsy dog. As I closed in on them I deducted a multitude of details. I was able to deduce the middle name of Crewman Trochanter's maternal grandfather (from the asphyxan in the wake of the hornet), the secret fantasies of Crewman Ursley (from a muted resonance in the Hondstarfer stone-drive), the scalp-itch of Captain Puckett (he is allergic to the Stoimenof salt in the galley of the hornet). It is all down in my notes. I tracked them here. There they sit confounded! Arrest the criminals!"

"Slit his throat!" Roadstrum howled, coming to his feet in the grip of what seemed to be a good idea. "He has told the truth at a meeting of the High Liars. Kill him! Kill him!"

"Of course we'll kill him," said the sad President. "We'll slit his throat, and we'll drop him through the trap like the dog he is. But not before he's blown the whistle on you."

The sherlocker blew an old-style police whistle. Three hundred coppers boiled into the room, manacled the brave hornet-men, and dragged them away to the terrible place from which, it is said, there is no returning.

*The place itself, and ne'er a good word spoke of it,  
You shiver when you even make a joke of it.*

*Though some go cocky, gaily in hand-basket there,  
The most fare sadly in a clammy casket there,*

*Where Dante doled "l'orrible soperchio  
Del puzzo—e gran pietre in cerchio."*

*Undying pain and gaping loss, no doubt of it.  
A wide way leading in and no way out of it!*

*But none have told the blackest horror shrouded there—  
Tall teeming terror—but it sure is crowded there!*

Ibid

They were taken as prisoners to Hellpepper Planet. They were up in court there before Tiresias, the blind Theban prophet, who had considerable to say about the workings of this place. Tiresias was not really blind; but he had weak eyes and he wore blue glasses. His underlings called him Blinky.

"You are up for the rape and murder of the person and planet of Aeaea," said Blinky. "I assure you all that a shudder ran through Hell itself here at the news of your crime. Have any of you regrets?"

"Regrets?" Roadstrum asked in a hollow voice. "My only regret is that I didn't get to hear that fellow tell more of his story at the Club. There were these space warriors, you see, Blinky,

and there were their noble and heroic leader, and they—”

“Roadstrum, Roadstrum,” Puckett protested. “It was our old story that he told. ’Twas of ourselves.”

“I know that, but he told it so much better than it happened. How can I be happy in Hell with my ears itching for more of it?”

“A little order here,” Tiresias requested severely. “Something is wrong. This babbling fool cannot be Roadstrum himself?”

“Something is indeed wrong, Blinky,” Roadstrum said evenly. “This silly place cannot be Hell itself?”

“I own a certain disappointment in both,” said one of Tiresias’ lieutenants, “but it is, and apparently you are. If you have come with high expectations of anything, you have come to the wrong place.”

“Have you any defense for your damnable crime?” Tiresias asked sharply.

“Do you want a lawyer?” the lieutenant asked. “There are plenty of them to be had here.”

“We’ll be wanting no lawyers,” said big Roadstrum. “We’ve made our pan, so we’ll fry in it. Is that the way the saying goes? Let’s just take a look at the accommodations here, fellows.”

“You are not free men to be making examinations,” said Tiresias. “You show signs of levity, and that is the one thing not permitted here. This place is for serious persons only. If you are not serious now, by hell you’ll get serious pretty quick! Hear it! You are sentenced to durance forever. Process them, minions.”

“Hold it!” Roadstrum roared. “Hell, this isn’t Hell! Crewman Bramble, you’re the nearest thing to an intelligent man we have in our party. Can this hayseed place with that pathetic ineptitude on the bench be Hell itself?”

“‘They order things so damnably in Hell,’ as the philosopher said. I don’t know, Captain; I just don’t know. It might be.”

“Puckett, go that way,” Roadstrum ordered. “Trochanter, go the other. Blinky, shut up. Report back to me within the hour on the size of this place and the torture facilities here. Now then, Blinky, while they’re about it, I’ll just have a look at that register of yours there and see who is signed into this place. Kstganglfoofng!! It’s hot!” (Roadstrum sometimes used high-Shelta swear words, as did many skymen.)

“Of course it’s hot, Roadstrum. Everything is hot here,” said Blinky Tiresias, “and you won’t get used to it.”

“That’s all right; that makes it a little more like the real thing. A man’d have to have asbestos hands to handle that register, but why are the names in it writ so small?”

“Everything is writ small here, Roadstrum. There’s such a lot to be crowded in.”

“But you do torture, you do rend and tear, and break and burn?”

“Certainly, certainly, Roadstrum.”

“You have all the monsters and stenches, all the white-hot rocks, all the pits of flame, all the soul-burning regret, all the horror and shrieking without end?”

“We have it all, Roadstrum. You will have your surfeit of it.”

“But it bedevils me, Blinky, where you have room for it. This is a small place.”

“We haven’t room for it. It’s awfully crowded. Millions and millions, you know.”

Looking generally bedraggled and with their feet smoking, Puckett and Trochanter were back from their explorations.

“I believe it’s a fake, Roadstrum,” said Puckett with deep disappointment. “This isn’t the Hell I believed in. It’s as though we looked at it all through the wrong end of the glass. Oh, there’s torture enough, crude and raw, and there are the millions of sufferers. But it’s all too small, too small.”

“It isn’t a hundred meters across,” declared Trochanter. “And the tortures are repetitious. No real imagination in them. Not what you’d like. I think we’d better shop around for a better Hell before we commit ourselves here.”

“You can’t,” said Tiresias. “You’re already committed here. This is all the Hell there is.”

“Be reasonable, Blinky,” said Roadstrum. “What reason have we to believe you? It seems inadequate to my men and it seems inadequate to me. This petty place cannot be—”

“This petty place cannot be Hell, Roadstrum? Ah, but it is, my friend. That, you see, is the hell of it. Minions, minions, we waste time. Prepare them.”

“Blinky, where are the towering flames?” Roadstrum demanded.

“It’s all high-frequency cookers, Roadstrum. No smoke, no flame, no mess.”

“But it’s too small. There is not even room for all the old-time horse-thieves.”

“It is crowded, yes, but we make room. Get with it, minions. First you will miniaturize them.”

“Miniaturize!!!” howled Roadstrum. “Miniaturize!!!” howled they all.

“Nobody will ever miniaturize me!” Roadstrum roared. And then he broke loose with an inexcusable display of shouting and bad manners:

“It stifles, it shrinks! Where are great fires and the bottomless pits? Where is the howling of the triply-damned, and the clanking of monsters? I’d go to Hell in black glory if it fell to my lot, but I will not abide in this place! It’s a rumble, men; rise in your wrath! Break out of it!”

“It’s a rumble,” they roared like cresting waves, great Puckett and Trochanter and Clamdigger and Threefountains and all.

Man-a-bleeding, but they broke out of that place! You say it can’t be done, but they did it. Their expectations had been too high, and no second-rate Hell could hold them.

In a way, this was their greatest feat. No one else had ever broken out of there before. But they were still in sad straits, without craft, lost and in great pain, mired in the boiling swamps a little to the south of Hell. How, how would they ever get off of Hellpepper Planet? Was it possible that any of them should live through this thing?

## CHAPTER EIGHT

*More gory episodes omit we ken of them;  
The Chantey sings ten years filled up with ten of them.*

*Of crewmen dead we weep, and what a row they had!  
And some had gotten home but none knows how they had.*

*All high adventures, twined as vermicellio,  
Through carpers carp "the thing's distinctly paleo."*

*Great Road-Storm wished he'd never seen the first of it,  
He didn't guess the last would be the worst of it.*

*Penultimate we give with wry apology  
This mithermenic of a new mythology.*

Aliunde

ROADSTRUM always said that he walked home from Mars, the last lap of his journey. This may not have been true. He had fallen into habits of untruth somewhere along the way. But he came home, home to Big Tulsa the marvelous, the Capital of World.

He arrived alone, in evil case, to find troubles in his house. He was broke and bewhiskered and tired to the marrow of his bones. And yet he was a man of means, so he made a short visit to replenish those means.

The bank had been modernized. It was a transparent young lady who waited on him. It wouldn't have startled him on one of the other worlds, but it did at home.

"I am unsure," he said. "Are you people?"

"I also am unsure," said the young lady, "since our position is presently under litigation. Actually we are the newest thing in people. Soon there will be none produced in the old manner. You will have to admit that it was a very grotesque arrangement. Here is your account, Mr. Roadstrum, supplementary name Great Road-Storm."

"Ah, it shocks me to see how it has shrunk." Roadstrum studied it. "It may yet be enough for a modest life, but something has gone amiss with it."

"There have been some fabulous withdrawals, sir. Not many fortunes would have survived such. Is this all you wish to withdraw now, sir?"

"That is enough for now. And block the account."

"Block the account? Penny will be furious."

"I hope so. Thank you, young, er—lady."

Roadstrum went to his house. Little Tele-Max was playing out front. Tele-Max was still little. Roadstrum had been gone for twenty years, what with one thing and another. The kid was a runt or he'd have grown bigger than that.

"Hello, Papa," Tele-Max said.

"Hello, Tele-Max. How did you know me?"

"From your pictures. You have become a legend; but that was several years ago; you're pretty much on the shelf now. There is nothing older than yesterday's legends."

"I know it. But what is that hellish racket, Tele-Max? You'd think even the trees would drop dead from that terrible noise."

"Oh, that's Mama and the suitors, and the song they always play. The trees did die from the noise. These are artificial trees."

"Suitors? What are they doing, having a party?"

"Papa, they've been having a party for twenty years."

"What do the neighbors say?"

"I don't remember any neighbors. I guess they all left a long time ago."

"That song is like salt in an open wound, Tele-Max. Did not your mother used to play it to excess many years ago? Did I not once destroy the tape of it?"

"So family tradition has it, Father. But they have worn out more than five hundred tapes of it since. That is the latest version they are playing now, by the Chowder Heads. You could hardly have heard it before."

"All thanks for small favors. I've been made a monkey out of by singing that *was* singing, and should I fall to this? I tell you what, Tele-Max, your mother has not seen me for twenty years. Another couple of hours will not matter. I will have to find the strength to face this. I wonder what I did about the suitors the first time. Wasn't there a first time?"

"The first time, Papa? The story is that you impressed them by shooting an arrow through twelve holes in a row. Later you killed them."

"What is an arrow, Tele-Max?"

"I don't know either, Papa."

There is one place where all the important persons of World come at least once a day, the Plugged Nickel Bar; and Roadstrum's old mates were all, in their own way, important persons. Roadstrum entered the portal (it had only a single narrow door) and the only one of his old friends he saw was Margaret the houri.

"Are you ship, shape?" he asked her.

"I am always ship," said Margaret. "I remember you a little. Were you not a pet monkey that I once had?"

"I was a pet monkey, but you didn't have me," he said. "Want to tie one on, Maggy?"

"Maggy? I, sir, am Charisse, or perhaps I am Chiara. I have been trying on roles. This time I shall assume a very arty role. Everything has become very arty on World."

"Ah well, Charisse or whoever, want to swing a gantry?"

"What an antiquated expression! No, I do not. No offense, but not with you. You are a space-ace. Don't you know that they're dead?"

"Most of them are."

"Oh, they're finished. The swish boys are all the thing again. I will get me a very delicate one, a limp limpet. It is all the thing to be very delicate and a little weary."

"I'm a little weary, but not that way. Sorry to have seen you Charisse, or should I say Chiara?"

"Melisand. I just believe that I will be Melisand."

"Hey, Cap'n," a huge slack-faced man called to Roadstrum. "Come bust a bottle with me. I think I used to know you before I got muddled in the head."

"And after the holocaust, God made green grass again!" Roadstrum roared happily. "Trochanter! Spleen of my spleen and aorta of my aorta! Trochanter!"

"Easy on the sloppy stuff, Cap'n. I like you too. Let me poke you one to see if you're real. A lot of them aren't. Hey, you are real."

"Of course I'm real!" Roadstrum swore, picking himself up from the floor (Trochanter poked hard). "Did any of the other men survive? Have you seen any of the others?"

"I talk to Cutshark and Crabgrass quite a bit."

"Trochanter, Crewman Cutshark died in the maw of the Siren-Zo, and Crewman Crabgrass was eaten by the Polyphemians. They're dead."

"I didn't say they weren't dead, Cap'n. I just said I talked to them quite a bit. I'm addled in my wits now, I've told you."

Trochanter, the crewman without peer! He was as rough a fellow as Crewmen Birdsong and Fairfeather, who had remained on Lamos to become giants. He was a hornier stag than even Crewmen Clamdigger and Threefountains. An incandescent, heavy, tall man. But some of the light had gone out of him now. He was still heavy, but not so—

"You aren't as tall as you used to be, are you, Trochanter?" Roadstrum asked him.

"Nope, burned the bottom half-meter of my feet and legs off on Hellpepper Planet. You remember that ruckus, Cap'n. Hottest ground I ever saw there! Say, I talk to Crewman

Clamdigger sometimes too. I think he's alive. He seems solidier than Cutshark and Crabgrass."

"Ah, several of us have survived, then."

"Cap'n, anytime you want to go again, I'll be here. You can't tell. You just might want to go again sometime."

"I will remember," said Roadstrum. "It is very unlikely, but if I ever go again I will certainly take you along, Trochanter."

"Captain," called the nameless houri, "if you *really* want to go again, I'll forget the Charisse and Chiara and Melisand bit and go along. And Crewman Clamdigger *is* alive. He bought the shell of a junk hornet with his last Chancel. It hasn't any drive in it, it won't go at all, it's not worth a thing, but he lives in it and broods. If you do go again, we have the beginnings of a crew."

"It is very unlikely, but I will remember it, Margaret the shape, and great Trochanter the crewman without peer!"

Roadstrum left the Plugged Nickel Bar with mixed feelings. He had regained part of the strength he needed to face things at home. He strode along with resolute step, and suddenly he discovered that his resolute steps were not reaching the pavement.

He had been grabbed by the hair of his head, lifted up by a great hand, and was pulled into a second-story window. There was booming laughter that reminded him of that of Bjorn on Lamos. But it was Bjorn's little boy, Hondstarfer.

"What on the wall-eyed world are you doing on World!" Roadstrum howled. "Hondstarfer, you are ungent for my sore sclerotics! Hey, did you ever get back far enough to be an old-time railroad hobo?"

"I got back there, Roadstrum. That's why I came to World in the first place. But the other hoboes wouldn't accept me. They were afraid of me. They said I was a railroad bull. What's a railroad bull, Roadstrum?"

"Don't know exactly, Hondstarfer. I didn't even know the old vehicles were sexed. What are you doing now, you old hammer-handler?"

"I'm a design engineer for the IRSQEVWRKILOPNIXTUR—"

"Yes, I know the bunch. They're a good outfit."

"—MURFWQENERTUSSOKOLUV—"

"I know the bunch, Hondstarfer. This is their building here, is it not?"

"—SHOKKULPOYYOCSHTOLUNYYOK—"

"Dammit, Hondstarfer, I said I knew the bunch. No use giving me the entire initials of the agency. How are you doing with them?"

"—TWUKKYOLUVRIKONNIC—that isn't the entire initials of the agency, Roadstrum; that's the short form. Oh, I'm doing pretty good. I'm a seminal genius, they say, and I have the most sophisticated tools ever devised to work with. And I do build some good things for them. I'm quite successful. I'll tell you something, though. In the daytime, with all those sophisticated tools, and particularly if someone's watching me, I just stall around. But at night —"

"Ah, at night! What do you do then, Hondstarfer?"

"Put away those damned sophisticated tools and get out my stone hammers. That's when I build the good stuff. Don't give me away, though, Roadstrum."

"No, I won't give you away. Hondstarfer, poor addled Crewman Clamdigger has purchased the shell of an old junk hornet, and—"

"I've seen it, Roadstrum."

"Of course it wouldn't be possible to put it in flying condition."

"I could do it in about an hour, Roadstrum. I'm good on those hornets. You going to fly again? I want to go along."

"No. I don't think there's a chance in a thousand that I'll ever fly again, Hondstarfer. It is just that my mind dwells on the old days."

Roadstrum left Hondstarfer and the MURFWQENERETC Building then. He had regained the strength he needed to face things at home.

That song was still going on, and it was still the Chowder Heads singing it. Roadstrum groaned within himself.

Then he went in and killed the suitors. It seemed to be what was expected of him. It was fun while it lasted. You know how those things are.

So he had everything now. He had dear Penny again. He had come back home in his deep maturity, home to green World, the world of his youth. He was still a man of means (there

were many accounts that Penny didn't even know about) and he had the ability to multiply those means. He still owed titles to several worlds to the men's-room attendant on Roulettenwelt, but he saw that by shrewd management he would be able to pay the remainder of this debt.

He had honor, he had respect, he was a high hero. He still had his health, despite the deep inroads made by events. He had sloughed off all the outer layers of him and became the essential onion, pungent and powerful and of an immediacy that sometimes brought him close to tears.

He had, you may have forgotten this part, one eye in his head and the other eye in his pocket. He took the other eye in his hand when they wished to discuss matters, and now he talked to it straight.

"Eye, my eye, everything is wonderful with us. We are home in peace. We have wonderful Penny again. We have the world of our youth. We are honored and respected and one other word which I forget. We have come to the peaceful end of our journey. Why does that sound less exciting every time I say it?"

The eye in his hand winked at him dourly. Eye was a tough old gump, not much given to easy enthusiasms. Roadstrum put it back in his pocket and once more contemplated his good fortune.

He would stick it out at least a week, he had promised himself. He had already stuck it out for three days, and that's nearly half a week. He didn't hang around the house much anymore. The Intimate people were doing a series on Penny, and there were always half a dozen of their fellows there getting down her poignant memories of her dead suitors, the more than a hundred of them.

"There was Thwocky," she had said. "Shall the first installment be my memories of Thwocky? He was the one you killed first; you remember, Roadsty? Drove the spindle of the player right through his head. Now, of the permissive-motivation of Thwocky, in the impulse patterns and lassitude-conjointment, there are nine salient aspects which I shall discuss as I build up the foundation of our intimacy.

This can best be understood in the nimbus of the empholeuon motif, which—"

Penny had always talked like that, but sometimes he hadn't listened. Now he found it harder and harder to seal off his ear. But it was still wonderful, all wonderful. He had honor and respect and another word which he had forgotten. He was home from his life journey, he had peace and benignity and benevolence and all good things and happy.

But there was one word in this setup that didn't sound right to his ear. Ear, not ears, he now had but one. Which word? What was wrong with a word? What was there of trickery about a word?

He thought of it while the afternoon deepened into evening. He thought of it while the artificial locusts began to chatter and hammer in the artificial trees. He went home and locked himself in his soundproof room, while Penny was telling revealing things about her suitors.

All things possessed in perfect peace for the rest of his life! And one word was wrong there? What word was wrong?

"Eye, my eye," he said as he took it into his hand. "All things are wonderful, and can you say that anything is wrong?"

But the eye closed on him in disgust.

Honor, respect, enjoyment, peace, conjugal love, ease, peace, benignity, peace, perfection, honor, peace. What was wrong with one of the words?

Peace. How does that sound again? Peace.

It exploded inside of Roadstrum. He erupted out of the building in a place where there had never been a door, strewn sheets and beams of the building after him.

"Peace?? For me?? Roadstrum, man, it is yourself you are talking about. Let you not hang it around your own neck! I am great Road-Storm! Peace is for those of the other sort!

He found his foxy forked tongue, and the roots of a deeper tongue that had been torn out, and gave great voice.

"I will be double-damned to a better Hell than Hell-pepper Planet if I will have my ending here in peace! Peace be not the end of my epic! An epic has already failed if it have an ending. I don't care how it ended the first time—it will not end the same now!

"I break out of it! Nobody will sing the last lines of me! A crew! A craft!"

His great voice reached all the way to the Plugged Nickel Bar and to the MURFWQENERETC Building. The great voice set up echoes in old addle-brained crewmen, in

a heartless houri, in an overgrown kid from Stone World.

Roadstrum ran away from the bloodless buildings and stood in the open. He took again from his pocket his off eye, his last companion.

“Eye, my eye,” he trumpeted. “Look at me! There are places we have never been! There is blood we have not spilled yet! Shall we let them restrict us to a handful of worlds. Eye, my eye, are you with me?”

And the eye came alive and gave a really joyous wink. A hammer-handling kid was already at work on the junk hornet. The lights turned on in dim-witted crewmen who became incandescent again. And others of their kind gathered to them.

“Men! Animals! Rise you up!” Roadstrum roared. “To come to the end of a journey is to die. We go again!”

Roadstrum got a craft and a crew. He went away once more.

*Alas, we have the terminal report of him!  
The coded chatter gives the sighted mort of him,*

*How out beyond the orb of Di Carissimus  
His sundered ship became a novanissimus.*

*His soaring vaunt escapes the blooming ears of us,  
He's gone, he's dead, he's dirt, he disappears from us!*

*Be this the death of highest thrust of human all?  
The flaming end of bright and shining crewmen all?*

*Destroyed? His road is run? It's but a bend of it;  
Make no mistake, this only seems*

*the end of it.*



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